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IRIS.

VOL. II.

IRIS

BY

MRS. RANDOLPH

AUTHOR OF

"GENTIANELLA," "WILD HYACINTH,"

"LITTLE PANSY," "RESEDA,"

ETC. ETC.

"Prouder than blue Iris."

Troilus and Cressida, A. 1, Sc. 3.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. II.

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IRIS.

CHAPTER I.

A bitter and perplexed "What shall I do?"

Is worse to man than worse necessity.

COLERIDGE.

LAURENCE was gone when Eve returned home: Mrs. Pleydell said he had gone soon after she started, having an appointment with Lord Rootley to go over some ground, something about an exchange of shooting for which he cared a great deal. Iris seemed already quite up in the subject, knew what difficulties there had been in the past, and how impossible it had always been to make Lord Beechmont,

who was no sportsman, take the requisite interest in the matter, and how sensible and practical Laurence thought Lord Rootley's views.

"That means that he agrees with him," said Eve, shrewdly. "Laurence cannot bear anyone to differ from him."

"That is because he knows what he is talking about, and talks better about it than anyone else," said Iris.

"Bravo, Iris, you have got up quite the proper tone already!"

"What do you mean?" said Iris, looking up in surprise. "I only said what is the case."

Eve had not observed anyone on the bank as she rowed home—indeed she had almost forgotten that Claud had seen anyone, and had therefore declined to accompany her; but, if she had looked, she might have seen a gentleman who was walking across a field some little distance from the river stop and scrutinise her attentively.

This was Lord Rootley, who had just parted

from Laurence after an interview respecting the shooting, wherein an interchange had been arranged with which they were mutually satisfied. He had caught sight of two figures seated under the shade of an oak near a summer-house belonging to Sir John Dibbleton's riverside cottage. He would have thought no more about it but that, as he was walking home, Eve's boat caught his eye.

There was no mistaking that sky-blue craft, and it suddenly struck him that she wore a pink dress, and that the lady under the oak had done the same. Was it possible that it could have been she? And if so, who could have been her companion? He knew a good deal of Eve's fast ways, and that her aunt had exercised but little supervision over her, indulging the girl's every whim and folly, and seeming to think that her fastness must prove an irresistible attraction. Could it be some London adorer whom she was meeting on the river unknown to her mother?

When he had seen her since his arrival at

Beechmont, she had seemed as little like a girl in love as could well be imagined; on the contrary, she had appeared free as air, ready to talk, laugh, and flirt with anyone. Well, of course he was not *quite* sure that the lady under the oak had been Eve—pink dresses in summer were far from uncommon,—still he felt a very strong conviction on the point. What ought he to do? Nothing, at any rate, till he was certain; when he was he would speak to Eve. She was very young, and probably did not realise the amount of her own indiscretion. Meanwhile he would discover who had taken the cottage.

The opportunity for this soon offered. He met the agent riding across the water-meadows, and after telling him of the arrangement to which he and Mr. Furnivall had just come, and which Mr. Campbell pronounced a most equitable one, equally advantageous to both parties, asked if he knew who was the tenant of Sir John Dibbleton's cottage.

"A Mr. Esmond," answered Mr. Campbell.

“He is not there alone; there is a very handsome young woman, who looks almost like a gipsy, who is called Mrs. Esmond; but there seems to be a very general impression that she is nothing of the kind. She has a pony-carriage, and drives into Bannerton a good deal. You can’t mistake the carriage—it has a handsome Norwegian pony with bells round its neck.”

Evidently, Lord Rootley thought, as he walked onwards, he had been mistaken. There must have been two pink gowns, and Eve’s appearance upon the scene was purely accidental; he was very glad indeed that it was so. What a foolish, frivolous little girl she seemed! How could he ever have allowed her undoubted prettiness even for a moment to persuade him that he was in love with her? Was it possible that if she had been only a little less fast, if she had taken his remonstrance at Maidenhead in good part, he might have even gone so far as to propose to her? It seemed impossible now, and yet he quite remembered how much he

had admired her. Well, he felt duly grateful for his escape !

It was wonderful how Eve and Iris could really be daughters of the same mother ! He had hardly ever, he thought, met anyone like Iris. It was not only her beauty, though that was of course undeniable, but it was her manner and her conversation. He had seldom met anyone so pleasant as she had been the night she had dined at Beechmont, and the hour during which he had talked to her at Rookwood.

He quite understood now why Laurence had discovered that apocryphal signal of Lady Beechmont's. How very nearly he had been very much *de trop* ! But who would ever have thought of a girl so evidently superior as Iris falling in love with such a man as Laurence, an excellent good fellow, of course, there was not a word to be said against him, but certainly not intellectual. And she seemed so specially formed for intellectual companionship ! Well, there never was any understanding women ! It

was impossible to predict whom one of them would like, or the sort of man she would choose to marry. With which sapient though hardly novel conclusion Lord Rootley turned his thoughts to other matters.

Mrs. Pleydell had been more than satisfied with Laurence's business arrangements; they were liberal beyond anything which she had either expected or desired. He had urged his plea for an early marriage most earnestly, and at length the 30th of October had been determined upon. Mrs. Pleydell found herself liking him better than she had expected; he was so thoroughly straightforward, and so evidently fond of Iris, that she was not inclined to criticise the very evident belief in his own supreme importance that might at another time have made her smile. But, like everything else about him, it was so genuine, he so firmly believed in it himself, that it had to be quietly accepted as part of his personality.

After his departure, Iris and her mother had had a long confidential talk. It surprised Mrs.

Pleydell to find how deep-rooted the girl's love for him evidently was ; she could not understand how she could ever have doubted, as she certainly had done, as to whether she cared for him or not. It became clear to her, however, as they talked, that Iris had by no means fathomed some things respecting Laurence. She had evidently no doubts as to their mental equality, and was quite prepared to find him an intellectual companion, fully capable of entering into all her thoughts and feelings.

Mrs. Pleydell felt rather puzzled : was it her duty to call her daughter's attention to this shortcoming on her lover's part ? She gauged Laurence's mental depths pretty accurately, realised that he had plenty of the sense required by a country gentleman to steer his course through the world, and was not at all likely to allow himself to be imposed upon ; but also saw clearly that art and literature were to him empty words, signifying absolutely nothing, that he knew little and cared, if possible, less

about any of the great questions of the day upon which almost everyone thought it necessary to possess some slender amount of information; but that there were certain formulæ, political and social, that he had for some reason or other taken up, and to which he adhered with a dogged obstinacy quite unconnected with any understanding of them.

On many points he was strongly prejudiced, and it was of no use to argue with him; for his prejudices, never being founded on reasoning, were, of course, quite independent of sense. Was it, she mused, her duty to point out to Iris their strange difference of tastes, to warn her that she might awake with bitter disappointment to the discovery that she had bound herself for life to a man with whom she had hardly a thought in common, and who, when she spoke to him of some question which was agitating the great intellects of the world, would answer with a yawn and a remark on partridges or cub-hunting.

If it had been any moral fault, Mrs. Pleydell

would have had no hesitation : she would have felt clear that her duty demanded that she should warn Iris, and she would have done so at once ; but in the present instance she felt it hard to decide whether it were necessary, or whether Iris might be trusted to discover the fact for herself. She had, of course, both seen and thought considerably more of Laurence than her mother had done, and if, knowing his peculiarities, she still thought she could be happy with him, she was of course the best judge. Still Mrs. Pleydell could not feel easy ; and after an almost sleepless night, caused by doubts as to whether she had better speak or not, she took advantage of the first moment that she was alone with Iris to say :

“My love, of course you know a great deal more about Laurence and all his views and opinions than I can possibly do. Does it ever strike you how very little he seems to know or care about what is going on in the world? Home politics do not seem to interest him,

and, as to foreign ones, he certainly is hopelessly at sea—does he never read the papers ?”

“I don’t think he has a great deal of time,” said Iris, who believed, as indeed Laurence honestly did himself, that he was a martyr to the cares of his estate, though in fact everything was left to his excellent agent. “You know, he manages all the property himself.”

“Even then he might surely read a little in the evening of the current events of the day. Does he ever read, Iris?”

“I don’t think we have ever talked of books.”

“What do you talk of, dear? *did*, I should rather say; for of course now it does not require a conjurer to guess.”

“I—I—it seems very absurd, but I really don’t know!” said Iris, slowly.

And this was literally true. It was no special mental gift of Laurence Furnivall’s

that had enthralled her, clever, cultivated, intellectual as she was. She had simply fallen in love with him, why she could not tell, as indeed no one ever can when the love is real, and after that whatever he said had seemed music in her ears.

Her mother said no more. She had spoken a few words which, in a thoughtful mind such as Iris's might bear fruit, and if they did not—well! then it was surely proof that she loved him well enough to endure all drawbacks. But still in her ears would ring the lines of “Locksley Hall.”

“Thou shalt lower to his level day by day ;
What is fine within thee growing coarse to sympathise
with clay.

As the husband is, the wife is; thou art mated with a
clown,

And the grossness of his nature will have weight to drag
thee down.

* * * * *

It may be my lord is weary, that his brain is overwrought :
Soothe him with thy finer fancies, touch him with thy
lighter thought.

He will answer to the purpose, easy things to understand—

Better thou wert dead before me, tho' I slew thee with my hand!"

Was such as this to be her darling's fate?

CHAPTER II.

To what gulfs
 A single deviation from the track
 Of human duties leads!

Sardanapalus. BYRON.

LORD ROOTLEY could not help more than once thinking of the strange coincidence that Eve, in a pink dress, should have been rowing down from the direction of Oak Cottage immediately after he had seen another lady similarly attired, seated on the shady lawn attached to it. And, as it afterwards occurred to him, he was almost sure that he had seen two boats moored under the bank

near the oak-tree, though he had not recognized Eve's gaily painted craft.

Still, after what Mr. Campbell had told him, it seemed quite impossible that the girl's appearance could have been anything more than a coincidence, and he felt almost angry with himself for having suspected her. Doubtless, now that she had the advantage of her mother's care, and of the example of her very charming sister, she was infinitely nicer than when left with her aunt, who evidently thought fastness was fashionable and to be encouraged.

The day after he had seen Eve on the river, he was to go on some estate business to an outlying part of the property about fifteen miles from Beechmont. Lord Beechmont was by nature a very indolent man, and had allowed his constitutional dislike to any exertion to get quite the better of him. He did not mind listening to details given him by his son or the agent in his study, where he could recline at his ease in a comfortable

lounging-chair, and smoke one cigar after another. But nothing could induce him either to go over the property himself, or to see any of the tenants.

It bored him, he said, he never knew what to say to them, and barely understood—because he would not try to do more—what they required of him. Where was the use of a superior sort of agent like Campbell, if he did not take all that sort of trouble off his hands? If Rootley liked the sort of thing, he was very welcome to interest himself about the estate as much as he pleased, if only he did not want to introduce too many new-fangled notions. Of course where subscriptions were required for the church or the schools in any parish in which he had property, his mite would be cheerfully forthcoming. Church and State had always been the watchword of the party, and he was the last man in the world to go back from it, and he would gladly double or treble his subscription to any school to save the parish from the tyranny of a School Board.

But he did not hold with the Workmen's Clubs, of which Rootley was always talking, in his opinion nothing but Radicalism and mischief ever came of them; and as to coffee taverns—well, of course it was a bad thing if men drank too much, still he thought beer was more the drink for an Englishman. Why could not Rootley leave the poor fellows to enjoy themselves in their own way? They did not thank him a bit for interfering. And Lord Beechmont would light a fresh cigar, and sip his hock and seltzer, and wonder plaintively why everyone could not take life as placidly as he did, without worrying themselves about the welfare of their fellow-creatures.

Lord Rootley's temperament was very different from his father's. He had almost a superabundance of energy, and, as he had not been allowed to have any profession, he found an outlet for it in helping every movement which he honestly believed to be for the benefit of the lower classes. He was, both by education and conviction, a Conservative, but he was no

bigot, and, if he saw anything which he thought good and useful in schemes started by persons of opposite views, he was always ready and willing to co-operate.

He said as little as he could about such matters at home ; his father utterly declined to be interested, and was apt to express peevish annoyance if he heard of his son working in concert with anyone who did not strictly belong to his own school of politics ; his mother languidly wondered how he could take so much trouble about people who were sure to be ungrateful, and to turn against him at the first opportunity ; whilst Hildegarde utterly declined to listen, and only predicted that he would bring home all sorts of fevers, and probably kill them all.

Only Imogene cared to listen to him, but he had her full sympathy, and when all she could spare from her allowance proved too little for what her kind heart longed to do towards relieving the distress of which he gave her heartrending accounts, she turned her talent

for drawing to good account, and sold her water-colour sketches for sums that helped in some degree his work of charity.

It was an accidental mention by Iris, the night he had taken her in to dinner, of her interest in one of his schemes, with which she had no idea that he was connected, that had given them so much to talk of, and had caused him to conceive a very high opinion of her. He had done a great deal on the Firshire estate, for Lord Beechmont, though always grumbling at his "new-fangled notions," and pretending that he would only set the people above their station, and make them discontented, loved his ease too much not to allow himself to be persuaded, rather than be obliged to listen to his son's arguments, and attempt to refute them. Perhaps, too, when he heard his friends' lamentations over their various sons' predilections for cards, actresses, and other questionable amusements, he congratulated himself that his son's fancies took so very different a turn.

At any rate, Lord Rootley felt pretty sure

that he should be allowed to do as he pleased, so long as he did not shake his father's prejudices too rudely, and had welcomed his mother's fancy to spend this autumn at Beechmont instead of in Firshire, as his first opportunity of making himself really acquainted with the Coalshire property.

His road led him through the wildest portion of the forest after he had left Rookwood behind him. As he rode on by the grass rides that afforded the directest route to his destination, in the interval of admiring the sylvan beauties around him, he was thinking of Iris.

What a fortunate man Laurence Furnivall was! What a constant inspiration it would be to have ever at his side a woman such as Iris Netherleigh, full of wise and well-balanced enthusiasm for the welfare of others. With such a position as the master of Rookwood, unfettered by any will to which he was in duty bound to bow, and with such a help-meet ever ready to aid and encourage him, there seemed really nothing that he might not hope to

achieve. He was unconsciously growing envious of Laurence's good fortune, when, from a ride at right angles to the one he was pursuing, there emerged another horseman.

The stranger gave a start, and would very evidently rather have avoided the meeting, but they were too close together for such a thing to be possible, and Lord Rootley, recognizing him immediately, exclaimed,

"Urban! Whoever would have thought of seeing you here! Where are you staying?"

"Well, properly speaking, nowhere. I am merely a bird of passage."

"I thought at this time you were always in Scotland."

"Well, so I am generally, but one gets tired of always doing the same thing, and I took a sudden fancy for wandering."

"Will you come to us for a day or two at Beechmont? I am sure my mother would be glad to see you."

Lord Rootley said this in deference to a feeling of hospitality and politeness, and quite

against his own wishes and better judgment. Mr. Urban was a man well known in London society, of good family, rich, and good-looking; but his reputation was not an enviable one as regarded his conduct towards ladies, and many careful mothers declined to introduce him to their daughters. But he had become acquainted with Lady Hildegarde, had paid her a great deal of attention, and had been warmly encouraged by Lady Beechmont. Lord Rootley knew that he would never be forgiven by his mother or younger sister if it were known that he had met Mr. Urban and neglected to ask him to Beechmont, but it was with a feeling of infinite relief that he heard him reply,

“Thanks, my dear fellow, it’s awfully good of you, but I’m really afraid I can’t. You see, as I told you, I’m only a bird of passage, and I must be making my way onward.”

Lord Rootley felt decidedly glad; he had asked him, so his mother could not reproach him, and the invitation had been declined, at

which he greatly rejoiced : he did not press the matter.

“ Which way are you going ? ” asked Mr. Urban.

“ To Elmhurst, about six miles farther on. It is a piece of outlying property, and my father is so disinclined to exertion that I am looking over the estate for him. It is four years since we were any of us in Coalshire.”

“ Is it true that Lord Beechmont will allow neither mining nor building on his property ? They say so in Bannerton, but it seems almost incredible. Why, he might be a millionaire ! ”

“ Doubtless ; but he does not wish it.”

“ Well, it is a singular fancy, more especially as he comes here so seldom. It will be a grand thing for you some day.”

“ I quite agree with my father.”

“ Well, if I knew I had thousands a-year under my feet, I should not be satisfied to let them lie there undisturbed. I think I turn off here for Debenham, do I not ? Good-bye, Rootley, glad to have met you,” and Mr. Urban

disappeared at a canter down one of the green rides.

“Just the very last person one would have expected to meet,” thought Lord Rootley, as he pursued his way. “How glad I am he declined my invitation! How my mother can be so eager about him for Hildegarde I cannot imagine, and yet I believe nothing would give her greater pleasure than such a marriage. Well, happily his refusal does not look as if he were eager about the matter. I shall say I met him on purpose to let them know that he had the opportunity of staying at Beechmont and did not care to avail himself of it. I hope it may disgust Hildegarde; she generally cannot bear anything but fervent worship.”

And, by the time Lord Rootley had settled this to his satisfaction, he had reached Elmhurst, and found plenty to occupy his mind.

There was certainly no doubt that the church needed repair—indeed little short of restoration would do it much good. The incumbent, a young, delicate-looking man with his heart

evidently in his work, was overjoyed to find anyone who listened so patiently to all he had to say, who understood so exactly what was wanted, and who seemed to have no doubt that the necessary funds would be at once forthcoming.

The School Board already reigned triumphant; but Mr. Morton's great desire, after the repair of the church, was to obtain some means of combating the evil influence of the public-houses, of which Elmhurst certainly contained an undue number for its size. Mr. Campbell, he said, rather encouraged them, saying that the men who took them generally thrive and paid their rents, which was the chief point he had to look to as agent of the estate.

Lord Rootley listened attentively and sympathised warmly, but he could not promise assistance with so much certainty as he had done for the church. However, he promised to come over again shortly, and talk matters over again with Mr. Morton; and rode home revolving in his mind ways and means of helping in

the good work the young vicar had so much at heart.

The next day he inflicted the whole history of Elmhurst and its shortcomings upon his father, and fatigued him so much by his earnestness that, more to get rid of him than anything else, Lord Beechmont gave him *carte blanche* to do what he pleased there, and to draw upon him for the necessary funds.

"A triumph, Imogene, isn't it?" said Lord Rootley, as he detailed the result of the conversation to his sympathising sister. "It is a great deal more than I hoped for."

"Papa says your vehemence was really too exhausting."

"Well, I am very glad it was."

"So am I for the result, but I wish the permission were given from another motive."

"So do I, of course; but still let us be thankful for what I have got. Besides, do you know, I really believe he takes more real interest than he will allow, or perhaps than he himself quite knows."

"I should be very glad to think that," said Imogene, musingly.

"Well, really I do. Now I must go and write some letters about this business. How pleased Morton will be with my news! He is such a nice, earnest fellow, Imogene, we must have him over here. I should like you to know him."

"Rootley, I wish you would join the boating-party this afternoon. I know it will be very tiresome for you, but really Hildegarde seems quite wild, and they all appear so full of some racing they are to have that I cannot help feeling anxious. I should be so much easier if you were there; you would prevent anything very foolishly rash."

"Very well; if it will give you any satisfaction, I will go. Now come to my room and help with the letters."

When Eve made her appearance for luncheon, which Mrs. Pleydell had permitted as a long afternoon was to be spent in lawn-tennis, she found the programme was changed, and that

boating was to be the order of the afternoon. A message had at once to be dispatched, desiring the Gate House gardener to bring up her boat to join the others at the boat-house.

It was quite a little flotilla; three of the guests had, on Lady Hildegarde's invitation, brought their canoes, so with her own canoe, Eve's boat, and three belonging to Beechmont used by Lord Rootley and two others of the party, they mustered eight.

Lady Hildegarde was rather put out by Lord Rootley's presence; he was the only person in the world of whom she stood the least in awe, and she was always comparatively subdued in his presence. She still talked of racing and of beating each boat in detail, but it was with infinitely less excitement than if he had been absent. Lady Imogene was quite right in regarding his presence as an element of safety.

Various races had been rowed with different results; but Eve was well-pleased, having, as

she flattered herself, held her own triumphantly, and having received so many compliments that Lady Hildegarde, who herself dearly loved to be first in all things, began to tire of the amusement.

“Oh, we’ve had enough of the racing,” she exclaimed at last; “it’s always Eve first and the rest nowhere. Let’s go for a good row up the river, just for fun, not racing any more.”

“Agreed!” said everyone, and they soon passed the memorable eyot and the cottage, and swept on up the river to some beautiful woods.

As they were returning, just as they passed the cottage, a gentleman emerged from one of the windows on to the lawn, and, to his extreme surprise, Lord Rootley recognised Mr. Urban. Evidently he did not wish to be noticed, for on catching sight of the party he instantly withdrew; but his manner was quite that of a man at home, and Lord Rootley felt no doubt that he was the Mr. Esmond of whom

Mr. Campbell had spoken. It suddenly flashed into his memory that he had once seen a letter signed Claud Esmond Urban. A changed name, a doubtful, or, at any rate, a doubted wife, all were very appropriate to the character which was generally ascribed to Mr. Urban.

It was lucky he had not accepted the invitation to Beechmont; if he had, it would have been extremely awkward. It was evident, he thought, that no one but himself had noticed the gentleman on the lawn; certainly Hildegard had not, for she would have recognised Mr. Urban, and undoubtedly proclaimed her discovery. Doubtless, after his meeting with him the day before, Urban would take every care to avoid any of the Beechmont party; it was the least he could do under the circumstances.

“We shall see you at Miss Netherleigh’s tomorrow, of course, Eve,” said Lady Hildegard as they parted. “I don’t know why you said her parties were dull—really it wasn’t half bad

last time. Are you coming to tennis at the barracks on Friday?"

"No," said Eve, pouting. "It's so tiresome, they always ask us, but mummy never will go. She says she doesn't want to meet all the people of the new town who are civil to the officers, and that they are obliged to ask. Of course they are vulgar—at least, a good many of them—but they couldn't eat us. But mummy's so dreadfully afraid of having to know them."

"Well, come up and play on Saturday, and we'll tell you all about it."

Eve's first thought was that on Friday the coast would be clear, and that she might have another meeting with Claud; these meetings were rapidly becoming the great interest of her life. She thought of little else but his handsome face, bewitching eyes, and protestations of love, and enjoyed immensely the romance and excitement of a clandestine love-affair and engagement. She scribbled a little note,

signed, "Your own Eve," and contrived to post it herself that evening, telling him that on Friday the *Waterlily* would be afloat, and that he must meet her.

"Well, did you see me on Wednesday, when you came careering in such force up the river?" he asked, when they were established under the oak.

"Yes; how quickly you disappeared!"

"Did anyone else see me?"

"I don't suppose so. Nobody said anything. Why? Should you care?"

"As I told you, I know all the Beechmont party, and I don't care to see them. Has anyone been making love to you, Eve?"

"Why do you ask?"

"Because you belong to me, and I don't choose anyone to do it. Have they?"

Now certainly both Colonel Leybourne and Captain Jorton had been flirting in a very determined manner with Eve—indeed, the latter, who was to leave Beechmont that day, had tried unavailingly the day before to find an

opportunity of proposing to her; but as this would apparently not be pleasing intelligence to Claud, Eve carefully suppressed it, and said, with a killing glance of her blue eyes,

“Don’t you say I belong to you?”

“You little darling, do you always remember it?”

“Of course I do.”

“Do you think of me always, Eve—even when you are amusing yourself, and listening to a lot of fools making pretty speeches to you?”

“Are you a fool for making me pretty speeches?” asked Eve, innocently.

He laughed.

“You pretty little kitten, most men are fools when a pretty woman is in question. Eve, what will you do when I go away from here?”

“Go away!” and the girl turned pale—“for good, do you mean?”

“For good or evil, *que sais-je?* but for ever, at any rate.”

Eve was silent, it was such a crushing blow that she could not speak. Now that he spoke of going away she realised how completely her heart had passed from her own keeping into that of this stranger who talked so calmly of going away, and asked her what she would do. But surely she was engaged to him, at least up to this moment she had fully believed so ; if not even she would not have been so ready to offer him her company. Her bewilderment was so great that she hardly yet felt the pain of her wasted love, though she was dimly conscious of a dull leaden weight at her heart.

He watched her as she remained speechless, then put his arm round her and drew her towards him. She felt a desire to resist, and yet she could not, she felt as one fascinated and helpless.

“You silly little bird,” he said, tenderly : “how your little heart flutters ! Eve, Eve, did you think when I said I was going away I meant never to see you again ?”

"I did not know. You spoke so very strangely."

"And you cared, Eve?"

"Oh, you have no right to ask me such questions," cried the girl, passionately, "do not I prove it only too well by coming here to meet you? I cannot bear to think what would happen if it were known. It frightens me. When will you come before me openly so that I may recognise you?"

"You must not be impatient, my pretty Eve," and even through the sweetness of his caressing tone she almost fancied there was a mocking ring, "you know the proverb, '*Tout vient à point à qui sait attendre.*'"

"When are you going away?"

"It depends on circumstances. I cannot tell you positively. You must write to me, Eve."

"It will be found out, I know, and then, oh dear! there will be such a fuss and I shall never be allowed to move alone."

“Then, darling, you must come to me.”

“But why—why can’t you come to mamma as Laurence did for Iris?”

“All in good time, little one. If I did now, how, pray, would you explain our acquaintance? As long as we love each other, Eve, it will come all right.”

“I like to think so; but when you are away it will be hard.”

“Well, I am not gone yet.”

“It is time for me to go.”

“You always remind me of Cinderella, afraid to hear the clock strike twelve. Well, good-bye, little one,” and he gave her a kiss before handing her to the boat.

The setting sun was blazing in their eyes or they might have noticed a pedestrian on the opposite side of the river; having his back to the sun he saw them plainly. It was Lord Rootley, who had been to one of the further keeper’s lodges to see one of the watchers, who, as he had heard that morning, had broken his leg by stepping into a rabbit hole the night

before. He was returning across the fields, arranging various plans for Elmhurst, certainly thinking neither of Eve Pleydell nor of Mr. Urban, when the flutter of a white dress caught his eye and he saw Urban kiss the girl and place her in the boat.

Lord Rootley felt much perturbed; what ought to be his course? He could not reconcile it to his conscience, knowing what he did—Urban's character, that he was living in Coalshire under a name other than his own, and was accompanied by a wife—to do nothing. Still, if he went to Mrs. Pleydell, Eve would certainly come in for a great deal of displeasure, and, fast as he thought her, he fully believed that she was acting more thoughtlessly than wickedly. She had doubtless known Urban in London, and was quite unaware of the compromising circumstances of his present life.

He would speak to the girl herself. True she had once indignantly and even rudely rejected his advice, but he would not on that

account bear her malice, but would help her if he could. He would make an opportunity the very next day, disagreeable as the task would be. And having thus pacified his conscience, he turned to pleasanter thoughts.

Eve was so unusually silent that evening that her mother asked her once or twice if anything were the matter, and at length declared that she must be overtired and must not row so much. This at length roused Eve, who, fearful of being deprived of her one means of meeting Claud, declared she was not tired in the least, and began to talk with almost feverish vivacity, and to comment volubly on Iris' description of an unknown pony-carriage they had met in Bannerton, with a love of a Norwegian pony with bells, driven by a wonderfully handsome dark lady, just like a picture of a beautiful gipsy.

CHAPTER III.

I pray thee cease thy counsel
Which falls into mine ears as profitless
As water in a sieve.

Much Ado About Nothing—Act v, Sc. 1.

FOR almost the first time in her life Eve spent a sleepless night. She could feel no doubt about the matter now, she was undoubtedly in love. How she had laughed at others, sneered at the “tender passion,” vowed that she would never be so foolish! But the spasm of agony she had felt when Claud had said so quietly, “What will you do when I go away?” had opened her eyes to the state of her own feelings, and she realised, with painful distinctness

and absolute terror, that her happiness was wrapped up in him.

It was true that he professed to be devoted to her, that he had said he could not live without her, and that if he could not return she must join him ; but still she had a feeling of insecurity, though she fully believed in his love. It was only of herself and of him that she thought, never of her mother, excepting to consider how best she could be kept in the dark.

Eve never for a moment questioned that, if Claud went away and sent for her, she should join him at once ; then when they were married they would go abroad for a little, and when they returned her mother would be quite reconciled, and all would be right. But, even when she had arranged this, Eve was too agitated to sleep, and only fell into a doze when it was almost time to get up.

Perhaps, in consequence of her disturbed slumbers, she was very peevish at breakfast, and answered Iris so snappishly that Mrs.

Pleydell called her to order more than once. She yawned so portentously over her reading that at length her mother lost patience, and declared that she must be far too tired to go up to Beechmont, and run about in the sun playing tennis, that unless she at once stopped yawning, sat up and read properly, she must stay at home all the afternoon and rest.

Thus adjured, Eve sulkily obeyed, and Mrs. Pleydell, who, while insisting on a certain amount of obedience as a species of moral discipline, did not wish to draw the reins too tight, and deprive the girl of the pleasures for which alone she seemed to live, made no objection to her departure directly after luncheon.

Eve was very much puzzled that afternoon by Lord Rootley's manner. He kept close to her side, and seemed annoyed at not being able to secure a *tête-à-tête*. It was very different from the persistent way in which he had avoided her ever since her rejection of his remonstrances at Maidenhead. Of course she

accounted for it in the way most flattering to her vanity, and believed that, now that he was thrown intimately and constantly with her, he really found her irresistible, and was returning to his allegiance.

And the fact that she really had given all the love she had to give—all, that is to say, that was not centred on herself—to Claud, and that she fully believed herself to be engaged to him and meant to marry him, did not prevent her being extremely gracious to Lord Rootley. His return to captivity was a tribute to her power, and, after the grave way in which he had found fault with her, lent immense piquancy to the delightful prospect of being able to refuse him. Eve's spirits rose till she was almost wild, and when at last she was about to leave, and Lord Rootley asked permission to walk home with her, her elation knew no bounds.

Lord Rootley felt his task to be anything but a pleasant one, and found it very difficult

to commence. Eve, who fully believed that he meant to propose to her there and then, wished heartily he would begin, and had already arranged exactly what she should say in reply. She felt quite startled when he at length broke silence by saying, in a very grave voice,

“Miss Pleydell, I hope you will not think me impertinent for interfering in your affairs, but there is something I must say to you, a warning I feel bound to give.”

Then he was not going to propose! She should not have the delight of refusing him! It was in a very pettish tone that Eve said,

“Well?”

“Accident led me yesterday across the fields opposite Sir John Dibbleton’s cottage.”

Eve started and turned very red, but she did not make any reply. She was rapidly calculating the chances of his telling her mother, or of

her being able to persuade him to keep silence. After a pause, finding she did not speak, he continued,

“May I ask if Mrs. Pleydell was aware of your visit to Mr. Urban?”

“Mr. Urban? who may he be? I never even heard of him!” said Eve, in genuine surprise.

“Pardon me, but I saw your leave-taking;” then, as an idea suddenly occurred to him, “is it possible that you have never known him before?—that you know him only as Mr. Esmond?”

“I do know Mr. Esmond,” said Eve, in a bewildered tone.

“Well, I do not know how you may have made acquaintance with him, but it is right that you should know that he is not Mr. Esmond, but Mr. Urban, a gentleman who does not possess by any means a spotless reputation where ladies are concerned.”

A long pause, and then Eve said, very coolly,

"I cannot see what possible business it is of yours."

Lord Rootley coloured.

"I beg your pardon; I imagined you might prefer my speaking to you to my going to Mrs. Pleydell."

"Why should you do either one or the other? What possible right have you to interfere?"

"Believe me, I claim no special right. But when I see you, a pretty and very young girl, taking a tender farewell of a man who is supposed to be married, and is living in the country under an assumed name, I conceive it to be only the act of a friend to give you a word of warning."

"Married!" said Eve, with an accent of sovereign contempt, "that shows how little you know what you are talking about. He is not married at all."

"The lady who is living at the cottage is called Mrs. Esmond. I have not seen her myself, but I am told she is dark and very

handsome, and drives into Bannerton with a Norwegian pony hung with bells."

"What?" said Eve, sharply.

Iris' description of the pony-carriage they had met in Bannerton the day before at once recurred to her.

"Perhaps you may have seen her?" observed Lord Rootley, interrogatively.

"No."

"Neither have I, but I have heard of her."

"Still," said Eve, whose feelings and temper were both in a state of intense irritability, the former because, in spite of her determination to believe Claud perfect, a terrible doubt of him would intrude itself into her mind, the latter because Lord Rootley's expected proposal had resolved itself into a lecture, "still I do not see in the least what business you have to speak to me in this way. I consider it very impertinent."

"Would you have preferred my telling Mrs. Pleydell? I fancied you would not."

"I don't see why you should meddle with what does not concern you. If it were Hildegard it would be different."

"My wish was to do good, to save a young and inexperienced girl from being gravely compromised by a worthless man. Does Mrs. Pleydell know Mr. Esmond?"

"I shan't tell you: you have no right to ask."

"I shall ask her whether she thinks him agreeable."

"You will do nothing of the sort!" cried Eve, facing round on him with flashing eyes.

"Yes, I shall. If you will not listen to reason, I shall save you in spite of yourself."

"What is it you want me to do?" asked Eve, stopping and looking at him very steadily.

It had suddenly struck her that the wisest plan would be to appear to listen to him, to promise whatever he might require,

and then to follow her own course. In conformity with this plan, her face and manner changed so much that Lord Rootley believed she was really yielding, and answered eagerly,

“I want you to promise not to see him again without your mother’s knowledge.”

“And if I refuse?”

“I shall come to the Gate House and tell her what I know, what I saw.”

“I wonder you are not ashamed of being a spy,” cried Eve, passionately.

“I don’t think you are entitled to consider me one because in walking through the open fields I happened to see you.”

“Well,” said Eve, with a well-acted appearance of sullenness, which, as she had no intention of abiding by her promise, was only assumed to make her companion believe in her sincerity, “I suppose I must promise. As you put it, I don’t see how I can help myself.”

“I am very glad indeed,” stopping and taking her hand. “The last thing in all the world I wished was to make mischief and get you into any trouble, but my conscience would not let me rest without warning you. Of course, if—if there is no reason against Mr. Urban’s coming forward, he can easily make Mrs. Pleydell’s acquaintance. Good night! I am sorry to have kept you so long. I am so glad you have promised!” and he turned homewards, congratulating himself on having done good to a silly little girl against her will, while Eve pursued her way to the Gate House full of wrath, mortification, and—doubt.

Surely what Lord Rootley had said could not be true! Claud could not be married! If he were, how could he have engaged himself to her? But still the description of the lady and pony carriage, which corresponded so exactly with what Iris had talked of the night before, considerably startled her.

Oh! with a sudden start, how foolish she

had been not to think of it before! Of course it was his sister, Miss Esmond, and some one had made a blunder, and called her Mrs. Of course that explained it all. But why should he call himself Esmond when his name was Urban? She must ask him; doubtless he had some excellent reason. The first day when she could be sure of Hildergarde and Lord Rootley being out of the way, she would make an appointment.

Accordingly, having laid her plans satisfactorily, the following Wednesday found Eve, regardless of her promise, once more under the oak-tree.

“It is lucky you chose to-day, *carissima*,” said Claud, after the usual endearments. “I find I am obliged to leave this the day after to-morrow.”

“Oh, Claud! And when do you come back?”

“Well, I doubt if I shall be able to do so at all. Don’t look so wretched, little sweetheart, though it is very flattering to me.

"We must write; and we shall meet again."

"Which name am I to write to you under, Esmond or Urban?"

He started.

"Who told you my name was Urban?"

"Lord Rootley. He saw us together on Friday."

Mr. Urban muttered an oath.

"And he said,"—looking at him very hard—"he said you were married."

"Did he indeed? Then he talked of what he knew nothing about."

"You are not, Claud?"

"You silly little Eve! What do you think?"

"Well, of course I couldn't believe it, but he said she had a carriage with a Norwegian pony and bells, and Iris was talking on Friday of having seen one just like it in Bannerton."

"I confess I don't see why I am to be married to a Norwegian pony, when I only want my little Eve."

"You are quite, quite sure you only care for me, Claud?"

"Quite, little woman."

"And when shall I see you again?"

"Well, that must depend a good deal on circumstances. I may have to go abroad for a little while on business, but at any rate before long."

"And when you come back you will be introduced to mamma, and get it all straight? I felt so angry when Lord Rootley took me to task, and yet I didn't dare say much, for fear he should tell mamma."

"You poor little thing!"

"Do you think it will be *very* long before you come back?"

"I can't tell. You must write. Will it be safe to write to you? Does anyone see your letters?"

"No; we have them in our rooms generally."

"I shan't write often, for fear of accidents. Write to me, Claud E. Urban (*Esmond is my*

name as well as Urban), at the Parthenon Club, Pall Mall. You pretty little bird, it is very hard to have to leave you."

"But need you really go, Claud? Men can always do just what they please."

"Can they? That's a feminine delusion, my pet. When you women have all the rights you some of you screech about, and are 'on an equality with men,' and all that rubbish, I don't fancy you'll find it will make much difference as to your doing exactly what you like. No one ever does find it possible that I ever heard of."

"I don't want rights and things," said Eve, pouting.

He laughed.

"Pretty women seldom do, my pet. They find they get what they want without any such nonsense."

Eve sat still, saying nothing and looking troubled. It was a real blow to her to find that Claud was going away, that this would be their last meeting, and, though he talked as if

he cared for her a great deal, he did not seem so cast down at the separation as she thought he ought to have done. She was sore and grieved, and altogether miserable, but still she could not feel angry with him. But it was with a very dismal little face that she rose to take her departure.

“Don’t look so wretched, little bird,” said Claud, putting his arm round her and kissing her repeatedly. “As I say, it isn’t for long. You’re sure to be in London some time, and then we can meet easily.”

“Ah! if mummy would only let me go back to Aunt Louisa!” sighed Eve.

“If you persist, my pet, of course she will. Who could resist my little Eve, when she had set her heart on anything?”

“Ah! you don’t know mummy,” with a despairing shake of the head.

“What! is she so very cruel? Well, cheer up, sweetheart, it won’t be for long.”

Then ensued a tender leave-taking, and Eve’s eyes were so blinded with tears that she never

saw that soon after her departure Claud was joined by a lady who seemed to be addressing him angrily.

That lawn under the oak-tree was hardly a place suitable for the meetings of people who wished their interviews to take place in secret. Habituated to the absolute desertion of the river banks during the summer months, neither Eve nor Claud Urban considered that now that Beechmont was inhabited, and the shooting season had commenced, the country was hardly such a solitude as had at one time been the case. As Lord Rootley had seen them on two occasions, they were now observed by Laurence Furnivall, who had been out shooting over a portion of the land recently exchanged with Lord Beechmont, and was now making a short cut home to dress for a dinner in the Close, where he was to meet Iris.

He stopped for a moment to make sure that it really was Eve, and thereby became witness of their very fervent leave-taking; he also saw the arrival of the other lady upon the scene,

and recognized the gipsy beauty whom he had admired a few days before driving through Bannerton. What could Eve know of Mr. Esmond he wondered—was he one of her London friends? Somehow he did not fancy they knew anything of the intimacy at the Gate House. He would ask Iris.

And so he proceeded to do that night at dinner. Eve, as usual, had refused to go, and declared she preferred a solitary evening to being bored by dull old men, who had nothing to talk about. Laurence, of course, took Iris in to dinner, as the engagement was now announced, and pronounced on all sides to be “most suitable”—a verdict that, when it reached her ears, caused Mrs. Furnivall to compress her lips and to look unutterable things.

“I say, Iris,” he began, as soon as they were seated, “how on earth comes Eve to be on such uncommonly intimate terms with that fellow Esmond, who has got old Sir John Dibbleton’s cottage up the river?”

"Eve! I don't know anything about it, Laurence; I never even heard of him, or knew that the cottage was let to anyone. What is it you mean?"

"I had been shooting, and was taking the short cut home across the Grange fields. As I came opposite the great oak that shelters the lawn a little way from the cottage, round the point, you know, I saw Eve and a very tall dark man, rather good-looking. They were on pretty intimate terms, I can tell you; he had his arm round her waist, and her head was on his shoulder, and he kissed her several times."

"Laurence!"

Iris looked so aghast that Laurence exclaimed, hurriedly,

"Take care; don't look like that. People will be asking what is the matter."

"You are quite, quite sure it really was Eve?"

"Am I likely to make a mistake about her?"

“No, no, of course not.”

“Besides, I saw her get into her boat—it was evidently the leave-taking on which I had intruded—and row homewards. Then a very handsome woman, who passed me in Bannerton the other day, and whose name, I was told, was Esmond, came upon the scene, and appeared to be vehemently reproaching the forsaken swain.”

“And Eve? You really saw all this? Oh, Laurence, it is dreadful! What will mamma say?”

“I heard to-day that the cottage would be vacant in a day or two, so perhaps this was a last fond farewell.”

“Oh, Laurence, I can’t laugh about it,” and the tears stood in Iris’s eyes.

“My dear Iris, I am not laughing.”

“But what can it mean? Eve has never said a syllable about meeting anyone on the river.”

“No—I should fancy this was something she would keep to herself. My dear Iris, pray

don't look so very miserable! People will think we are indulging in a lovers' quarrel, a thing which always appears to me to be simply idiotic."

"Do you feel incapable of quarrelling?" said Iris, smiling.

"With you, most decidedly; I don't say with anyone."

"But, Laurence, about Eve—what ought we to do? I don't like to tell mamma; she will be so shocked and vexed, and Eve will be so angry."

"Hadn't you better talk to her?"

"I suppose that must be it. But I am afraid I have very little influence with her. She says and thinks that I am old, but it never seems to occur to her that it gives me any right to advise her."

"I say, Iris, don't worry yourself about this. I wish I'd kept what I saw to myself."

"Oh, Laurence, don't say that. I am glad to know—that is to say, as such a dreadful thing has happened. I want to be able to stop

any more of it, to warn Eve to be careful. But I am so afraid she will not listen: she is so rebellious."

"If she makes you look so harassed, I shall wish she was back again with her aunt. By-the-by, she told me the other day that she was to go back as soon as her aunt was settled."

"I am sorry she told you so, for she has been told over and over again that she is not to do anything of the sort. I suppose the wish is father to the thought, and she cherishes a hope that by saying she is going she may get mamma to consent. She will not succeed, though."

"If she is prevented, she will revenge herself by some more escapades. I suppose this Mr. Esmond is a London acquaintance."

"I suppose so, for she certainly cannot have met him here. Do you know anything of him?"

"Nothing in the world, and neither does Sir John Dibbleton, for he was talking of him the

other day, when, as I tell you, I saw Mrs. Esmond in Bannerton. It was Sir John who told me who she was. She certainly is very handsome, just like a gipsy."

"A gipsy! Was she driving a Norwegian pony with bells?"

"Precisely."

"Then we saw her on Friday. Mamma was quite struck with her. But, Laurence, you say she is Mrs. Esmond. You cannot mean that she is his wife?"

"She is supposed to be so."

"But then—Eve—you said you saw him kiss her! Laurence, what does it all mean?" and Iris looked so piteous that Laurence feared she would burst into tears.

"Don't," he said, hurriedly. "You don't know how wretched you look. Mrs. Pleydell is looking quite anxious. Depend upon it there's nothing much the matter. Eve lived, I fancy, in a pretty fast set in London, and took to it as naturally as a duck does to water. This is only a sentimental *tendresse* she has got

up, probably to enliven the dulness of the country, and the farewell was the culminating point of the performance. Don't fancy that things are worse than they really are."

"I hardly see how they can be," said Iris. "However,"—in a more cheerful tone—"there is nothing to be done at this moment, and I have worried you half dinner. You have been very good to bear it, Laurence."

"I say, Iris, do you think you will be long in London?"

For of course the important matter of the trousseau could not be settled without a sojourn in the metropolis.

"Not more than ten days. Why?"

"Well, I want to know if you would mind my not coming up. You see I hate London at any time, and in September there's nothing to be done there, and lots in the country. Besides, you'll be running after milliners and dressmakers all day, and I could do no good."

"Won't you come up at all?"

“Of course I will, if you really wish it ; but, as I say, I shall see nothing of you, and I might just as well be doing something at home.”

“I should like you to do just whatever you like best, Laurence.”

But though she said it cheerfully, and really meant it, Iris could not help feeling a little disappointed. She did not think he would have been willing to lose sight of her for ten whole days. Still, as she told herself, she knew very little of men, except, of course, in a social, and therefore necessarily superficial way.

Girls who have been brought up exclusively in the company of women, without either father or brothers to enlighten them as to the peculiarities of the opposite sex, are always at a great disadvantage when first brought into intimate contact with men, compared with those brought up in mixed households. What these have learnt to regard as such matters of course as to be absolutely unworthy of remark, such as the masculine belief in the supreme importance of

anything that affects in the slightest degree the comfort or amusement of the male members of the family, the pre-eminence of all things connected with sport over such trifles as the comfort or the convenience of the women-kind, above all the serene belief that the world was made for man alone, and that woman ought to be deeply grateful for being graciously permitted to minister to his comfort—all these things, matters of course to girls brought up with brothers, are apt greatly to astonish and perplex those who are never really intimate enough with a man for him to be quite natural with them till they are engaged. Like Iris, they are apt to imagine that the natural masculine temperament is a strange peculiarity of the individual.

CHAPTER IV.

With wild surprise,
 As if to marble struck, devoid of sense,
 A stupid moment motionless she stood.

Summer. THOMSON.

IT seemed impossible to Iris that the little childish figure and *mignon* face that welcomed them on their return from dinner, could possibly belong to a girl who had recently passed through such an experience as Laurence represented Eve as having had. She looked such a perfect child, and her face always wore such an innocent expression, that, if Laurence had not been so absolutely positive, she would have comforted herself with the belief that he

must have been mistaken. She dreaded speaking to Eve, fearing that the girl would set her at defiance, and was yet anxious, if possible, to spare her mother the pain of hearing of what had occurred.

Iris had tried her very utmost to love Eve since her return home, and had even exaggerated to herself all her little sister's charms and fascinations, but her efforts had not been particularly successful. Eve had not thought it worth her while to conciliate her, on the contrary she had rather chosen to set herself in antagonism, and to talk as if her sister were an unattractive old maid; and though Iris was of course young and handsome enough to laugh at the silly child's absurdity, still it had not been the means of drawing them more closely together. They had hardly a pursuit or an interest in common, Eve ridiculed most of the things that Iris cared for, and thought right; and spoke of their mother in a disrespectful manner which she could not bear. Altogether, in spite of Iris' cordial endeavours, they were as

unsympathetic as it was well possible for two girls to be.

“Will you come to my room when you are undressed, or shall I come to you?” said Iris, as they were wishing each other good night at the top of the stairs; “there is something I want particularly to say to you.”

“To me?” said Eve, looking surprised; “all right, I’ll come.”

“Well, what is it?” she asked, as a little later she made her appearance in Iris’ room in a pale blue dressing-gown, and with her fair curly hair surrounding her head like a halo.

Iris did not feel it very easy to begin—at length she said,

“Eve, I heard something about you to-night which shocked me dreadfully.”

“You’re easily shocked I know,—well, what’s the matter?”

“Eve, is it, can it be true that you meet anyone secretly when you go up the river?”

“What should put such a thing into your head?”

“Then, isn’t it true, Eve? Oh, I should be so glad to tell him he was mistaken.”

“Who is ‘*he*’?”

“Eve, tell me first is it true that you met some one under the oak near Sir John Dibleton’s cottage, and that—that he kissed you?”

Eve gave a violent start.

“What? then he went there again to watch for me, to spy on me! I didn’t think even Lord Rootley would have done such a thing!”

“Lord Rootley! what has he got to do with it?”

“As if I didn’t know well enough who told you!”

“Eve, you are quite mistaken. It was Laurence who was taking a short cut home from shooting and saw you from the opposite side of the river. Oh, Eve, how could you do such a thing? Who is this Mr. Esmond? and how did you know him?”

“Really, Iris, I don’t see that it is any business of yours.”

"Eve, I should be glad to spare mamma the pain of hearing this. It would make her so very miserable."

"I daresay it might make her even crosser than she generally is, and I'm sure that isn't necessary."

"Eve, you ought to be ashamed of yourself, mamma is everything that is kind and indulgent. I would do a great deal to spare her this sorrow. Will you promise me not to see him again?"

"Well, as he is going away I can do that."

Eve was in a defiant humour. She felt that as both Laurence and Lord Rootley knew what she had been doing there was no use whatsoever in her professing innocence.

"Going away! Ah! Laurence heard that the cottage would be vacant in a few days. But, Eve, promise me that you will not write to him."

"As I said before it is no business of yours, and I won't make you any promise at all."

“Then, Eve, I must tell mamma.”

“Do as you like, I don’t care. I believe old maids are always spiteful and nasty.”

Iris could have laughed if she had not been too sincerely anxious about the silly child pouting opposite to her.

“It is not for mischief or spite, but for your good, Eve.”

“That’s what people always say when they’re going to do something extra-disagreeable.”

“I can’t help being disagreeable; it is your own fault. Oh, Eve! how could you do anything so underhand! a married man too!”

“He isn’t.”

“Laurence was told so, and his wife was pointed out to him. She was that very handsome gipsy-looking woman I told you we had seen in a pony carriage at Bannerton. Laurence saw her join him under the oak directly after you were gone, and he said they seemed to be quarrelling.”

“You’re inventing that!” cried Eve, starting up.

"Inventing it! Indeed I am in far too sad and serious earnest to invent anything."

"Surely it *can't* be true," muttered Eve to herself.

"Eve, had you heard it before? And yet you met him!"

"Don't be silly and make a fuss. Do you mean Laurence saw her there? Really I mean, you needn't pretend, just to make up a story."

"Really, Laurence told me he did see her, and that she seemed to be reproaching him violently."

"Good night!" said Eve, leaving the room abruptly.

When she was gone, Iris wondered whether she had done any good, or whether it would have been better to tell her mother at once. How Eve could ever have allowed herself to do such a thing was past her comprehension. Iris, who was proud to a fault, could not realise the possibility of enduring, much less enjoying a clandestine courtship. If the man who cared

for her, were not willing to claim her before all the world, she would have renounced him and professed indifference, no matter what it might cost her. She felt she had got but little information from her sister, had not even elicited the particulars of her former acquaintance with Mr. Esmond, about which she had intended to make such special inquiries.

It had never entered her mind as a possibility that there had been no prior acquaintance at all, that Eve had advanced to terms of the greatest intimacy without even knowing Mr. Esmond's name. Even if she had had the disadvantage of Eve's training, Iris' pride would always have been a safeguard to her against any such dereliction of maidenly reserve: as it was she could not even imagine the state of the case.

It was long before she fell asleep, and then it was only to dream of strange misfortunes happening to Eve, in which Laurence was somehow inextricably intermingled.

But if Iris was thus disturbed Eve was

infinitely more so. Laurence's report of what he had seen under the oak filled her with alarm. Was it possible that Claud had deceived her? That this woman really was his wife? She walked up and down the room turning the matter over and over in her mind, until at last the solution which had before occurred to her seemed her only way out of the difficulty. This beautiful woman was dark and gipsy-like—so was he. Doubtless she was his sister! Of course, that quite explained it!

Eve carefully put away from her the consideration that if this were the case it would have been only natural that Claud should have told her so when she told him she had heard he was married. This would have somewhat discomposed her satisfactory explanation, and therefore she wilfully closed her eyes to it, and steadfastly considered that she had quite established its authenticity.

But the misery which her doubts had caused her, had more than ever enlightened her as to the state of her own feelings and she could no

longer feel the slightest doubt that she had done what she had always so ridiculed in others—fallen desperately in love. It must have been the dulness of life at the Gate House, she told herself crossly, otherwise she never could have been so silly—it was so different from what she had always intended. Her scheme of life had been a year or two of flirtation and amusement culminating in a marriage with a man of wealth and rank, after which she would become one of the leaders of fashion.

But Claud was certainly very fascinating, and Eve forgot her ruined castles in the air, and began to build others of which he was the joint owner.

Perhaps it was a good thing that he was going away now. Even if Iris did not tell Mrs. Pleydell, as she had threatened to do, they could never have met again without a terror of being watched, while, if her mother once heard of it, Eve felt tolerably certain that all boating excursions would be strictly prohibited.

It would be worse to feel that he was close by, and yet to be unable to meet him, than to know that he was in London and to be able to write to him.

Perhaps she had been foolish not to promise Iris not to write; if she had done so her sister would have been satisfied, and she might have written just the same.

Eve considered that no promises were binding that were not purely voluntary. Well, she would promise in the morning, and perhaps that would satisfy Iris, and keep her silent. What possible business was it of hers? and why could she not leave other people's affairs alone? Eve wondered pettishly. She would, she was determined, do something whenever she had an opportunity to "pay the cross old thing out." So determining, Eve at length went to bed, and slept much more tranquilly than her sister.

It was not till the next afternoon that Iris had an opportunity of speaking to her alone,

and even then it was only by following her into her room, when she went to put on her hat to go to Beechmont for lawn-tennis.

“Eve, must I tell mamma?”

“What do you mean?”

“You know what we were talking of last night. I must tell her, if you will not promise to cease all communication, not to write. Eve, if he were a proper person for you to know, there would be no necessity for this mystery; he would come here openly.”

“You know nothing whatever about the matter,” returned Eve, snappishly; “however, if it is any satisfaction to you, I’ll promise, if you like.”

“I am very glad,” said Iris, quietly. “I should be so sorry to grieve mamma.”

“You are very tiresome and interfering,” grumbled Eve, as she ran downstairs.

The party at Beechmont changed its elements frequently, but was always about the same size. Both Lady Hildegarde and her

mother dreaded beyond anything being left to their own resources, and so kept the house quite full, and, the distance from London not being very great, it was easy to keep up a constant change of guests. Lady Hildegarde had set up a very strong flirtation with Captain Deverell, and even though she was herself otherwise engaged, Eve was mortified by his desertion, and would have dearly liked to detach him again from her friend. But at present there seemed little chance of success, and though she cared for some one else, and would not have accepted Captain Deverell even if he had proposed to her, she was decidedly piqued.

The lawn-tennis tournament was to take place in about a fortnight. Eve hoped to hear on this particular afternoon that the day was fixed; she hated everything indefinite, and always liked to know exactly when to expect and calculate upon her pleasures. Two or three parties from neighbouring houses had driven over to Beechmont that afternoon, and

it was very late before Eve made her appearance at the Gate House.

"The tournament is to be on the 28th of September," she announced at dinner.

"That is rather later than they thought of, is it not?" said Iris.

"Yes, a few days, but it suits better. Lady Beechmont asked if we should not have a party for it; there is to be a dance in the evening."

"I do not think I can manage it," said her mother. "I am not quite sure yet what day we must go to London about the trousseau."

"Oh, you must put it off till after the tournament," cried Eve, impetuously; "the bracelet is quite too lovely, and I've improved so lately, I really think I've a good chance of it."

Mrs. Pleydell made no answer. She was revolving in her own mind whether it would not be wiser not to take Eve to London when they went up on this necessary business. Mrs.

William Pleydell had returned from Germany, and had settled herself in Park Street, in a house much smaller but far prettier than her former more pretentious mansion in Hyde Park Gardens.

Having determined that Eve should under no circumstances return to her aunt, Mrs. Pleydell was inclined to think that it might be better that they should not meet at present. Mrs. William was sure to renew her entreaties to have her niece returned to her, and would make Eve even more discontented than she already was with life at the Gate House, and teach her to think it a great hardship to be expected to live with her mother, instead of with the aunt who indulged her every whim.

It would, she knew, be a sad blow to Tom Pleydell if Eve did not accompany them; still she felt sure that there was nothing but disappointment in store for him in that quarter, or, even if Eve were ever persuaded to listen to his wishes, that it would be productive of

nothing but misery to him. She always tried to give him clearly to understand this in her letters, but he made it evident to her in his replies that his feelings had undergone no change.

Mrs. Pleydell always sighed as she read his letters: she was greatly interested in Tom, and felt deeply grieved that love for her pretty, but, as she could not help thinking, heartless little Eve should mar his life. She almost wished he would put his fate to the touch. Eve's refusal, of which she had not the slightest doubt, might perhaps be couched in terms which would open his eyes to her real character, and destroy the illusions in which he indulged respecting her. It would be a severe discipline, but salutary. However, she feared there was no hope for it: Tom would not think himself justified in speaking to Eve till he had something better to offer her than the position of the wife of a clerk, and, unless she married some one else, he would go on devoting his life and affections to her.

Mrs. Pleydell felt more and more convinced the more she considered the question, that it would be injudicious to risk a meeting between Eve and her aunt at present, but she hardly knew how to leave her behind. It was out of the question to leave her alone at the Gate House: she was too young and giddy to be left alone; besides, at the first mention of such a thing, she felt sure that Lady Beechmont would insist on her staying with them, and that she did not wish. She could hardly prevent Eve from being a great deal at Beechmont and making a friend of Lady Hildegarde, but she did not regard the intimacy with favour or wish it to increase.

At length the idea of Miss Netherleigh occurred to her. If Aunt Rachel would but take charge of Eve during her absence, she might be quite easy about her; but would she? Mrs. Pleydell rather doubted. Eve had never been discussed between them since her return home. Mrs. Pleydell had felt keenly that it would have been better for her child if she had

taken her aunt's advice and kept her at home, but she did not like to acknowledge that Eve had disappointed her, and Miss Netherleigh rarely if ever volunteered her opinions unsolicited. But Mrs. Pleydell was quite aware that her aunt had watched Eve narrowly, and had little doubt that she had gauged her character quite as accurately as she herself had done. She determined to ask her, and the next morning she drove alone into Ban-nerton.

“It is seldom I get you alone now, Gracie,” said Miss Netherleigh, as she welcomed her niece.

“No, I have generally one of the girls,” said Mrs. Pleydell, settling herself in the corner of the sofa; “but, Aunt Rachel, I have come alone to-day because I want to ask you a favour. I must go to London with Iris at the end of the month about the trousseau, and I do not want to take Eve; I think it will only unsettle her to see her aunt again just at present. I really do not know what to do with her, unless you

will be very good-natured and have her while I am away."

"I shall be glad to help you out of a difficulty, Grace, as you may be sure. I think you are very wise not to take the child. But what does she say to it?"

"I have not as yet broached the subject to her, but of course it will be a disappointment."

"Yes, and she will not approve of the way in which you have disposed of her."

"I could not leave her alone."

"Certainly not. You and I see that, but she will not. However, I will make it as pleasant to her as I can."

"Don't put yourself out about her. I am so much obliged to you; it is a relief, I confess. If I left her at the Gate House, Lady Beechmont would have asked her there."

"Don't you like them? I took a great fancy to Lord Rootley."

"I like him and Lady Imogene very much and so does Iris; but Lady Hildegarde seems

to be entire mistress of the situation, and I do not like many of the people they have in the house."

"Still of course Eve is to go there a little?"

"Oh? yes, of course. Just as you think best, Aunt Rachel, you always know what is wisest. But it will not be so easy from here as from home."

"But there is this tournament. Well, I suppose most of the practising for that will be over before you leave. I will do my best, Grace, but the child will be discontented. You must be prepared for that."

"I daresay, Aunt Rachel, but I can only do what I believe to be best."

"Exactly. Well, when do you think of starting?"

"On the 26th, I think."

"Of course Mr. Furnivall goes with you?"

"No," and Mrs. Pleydell's countenance clouded considerably. "He asked Iris if she would mind very much his not coming up, as he want-

ed to have some shooting. However, she seems quite satisfied, so I suppose I ought to be."

Miss Netherleigh compressed her lips slightly, but made no remark, and, after a little more conversation, Mrs. Pleydell took her departure.

In a few days' time she made her arrangements respecting the London visit, and not till they were quite completed did she announce to Eve that she was to be left behind. To her surprise the girl did not seem much disappointed; she had expected tears, lamentations, and fits of sulkiness, but there was nothing of the sort. Eve seemed a little surprised, and said something about being sorry not to see Aunt Louisa, but she did not complain. Only when she heard that she was to stay with Miss Netherleigh, she asked eagerly whether she might not come to the Gate House every other day to row—the weather would soon be too cold, and she should like to have as much of the river as was possible.

Mrs. Pleydell, glad to find her decision so quietly accepted, willingly gave permission ; and supposed that it was the thought of the Beechmont Tournament that made Eve acquiesce so readily.

Iris, when she heard of Eve's petition respecting the boat, thought for a moment apprehensively of the inhabitant of the cottage, but the next she was very angry with herself. Had not Eve promised not to see him again, or even to correspond with him ? And Iris, to whom a promise was absolutely sacred, reproached herself bitterly for having even thought of the possibility of her sister's breaking her word.

Meanwhile Eve had received a letter from Claud Urban, saying that he was coming back to the cottage for a couple of days, and urging her to meet him. The time would be during her mother's absence, and it was this that had made her so indifferent to being left behind. Despite her promise to Iris, she had written to Claud several times, and had no hesitation about promising to meet him.

Full of her project, Eve, from the moment of her arrival at Miss Netherleigh's, made herself most fascinating to the old lady, and, though Aunt Rachel was far too shrewd to be completely deceived as to her real character, she yet conceived a more favourable opinion of her than she had ever done before. She made no objection to the days spent on the river: indeed, believing Eve to be alone, she considered them preferable to those spent at Beechmont, for Lady Hildegarde's fast manners and slang conversation were abhorrent to Miss Netherleigh's somewhat rigid ideas of what was ladylike and becoming. And so the day came when Eve, rowing up towards the cottage, was once more met by Claud.

They landed as usual, separate boats not being convenient for the lover-like endearments of which Claud was not sparing, and which Eve had learnt to think so strangely, perilously sweet. The interview was not a very long one, for Eve dared not be later than the hour at which Miss Netherleigh expected her.

“And you really go away for good to-morrow?” she said, lingering after a last and yet a last farewell. “Oh! Claud, when shall I see you again?”

“I suppose you’ll be in London next spring?”

“I don’t know. I hope so; but mummy’s so cross, and seems to fancy I ought to be quite contented in this dull place. But perhaps I shall get back to Aunt Louisa. I’m sure I hope so. Shall you be there, Claud?”

“Yes, probably.”

“And then you will be introduced properly, and it will be all right. Iris will know nothing of you as Mr. Urban.”

Eve had told her lover of Laurence’s discoveries.

“Yes, little woman, I’ll be introduced in due form.”

“Then,” said a voice behind them, “I hope, Mr. Esmond, you will introduce me too. I have not the pleasure of knowing this young lady’s name, but I will make myself known to

her, at any rate. I am sure," addressing Eve, "you cannot be aware of my existence, or you would not have met my husband here so often without asking for me. I am Mrs. Esmond—may I ask your name?"

Eve looked at the speaker, recognised the description which both Lord Rootley and Iris had given of the supposed Mrs. Esmond, and was in her boat rowing rapidly homewards before Claud could spring forward to assist her.

CHAPTER V.

These words have turn'd my hate to love ;
 And I forgive and quite forget old faults.

Henry VI.—Part 3, Act iii, Sc. 3.

ON the 26th, as she had arranged, Mrs. Pleydell left the Gate House and started for London with Iris, leaving Eve with Miss Netherleigh, on her way to the station, with many injunctions not to be troublesome or thoughtless, but to remember how kind it was of Aunt Rachel to have her.

In London they established themselves at an hotel in Dover Street, for though Mrs. William Pleydell had pressed them to be her guests, her sister-in-law infinitely preferred to be indepen-

dent. She had purposely abstained from mentioning in any of her notes her intention of leaving Eve at home, and was quite prepared for the storm of lamentation with which the intelligence was received when she and Iris appeared alone to dine in Park Street on the night of their arrival. She had done what she considered for the best, and listened in silence to her sister-in-law's vehement reproaches ; but she could not help feeling grieved at the sad disappointment which poor Tom's countenance displayed at the intelligence.

Later in the evening, when Mrs. William Pleydell was consoling herself by discoursing at length to Iris on what was and was not *chic*, what was indispensable for a smart trousseau, and what should be avoided, she did her best to crush any hopes he might have cherished that absence had caused Eve to think of him with any more affection than she had avowed when first interrogated by her mother.

"Indeed, Tom," she concluded, "her disposition often makes me very sad. She seems so

absolutely careless of everything and everyone but herself."

"She is so young, Aunt Grace."

"Yes; but indeed, Tom, I wish you would honestly try to cure yourself of your love for her. She would not make you happy, even if she cared for you, and that I do not think she is ever likely to do. She openly avows that all she thinks worth consideration in marriage is wealth and position."

"And I could give her neither," said Tom, sadly. "Aunt Grace, I know as well as you can tell me that it is hopeless; even if I had the wealth which she prizes so highly, she would very probably think me old and dull. I know well enough I am not half good enough for her, and I love her so well that I could rejoice—at least, I think I could—if I heard that she had found anyone with all she requires, and who loved her as she ought to be loved. It is no use my trying to give up loving her—I have tried, and can't. The more I try, the more I feel how impossible it is."

"It is infatuation!" exclaimed Mrs. Pleydell, almost impatiently. "I do not want to say anything harsh of my own child, but indeed, Tom, I cannot help wondering how, seeing so much of her as you did, you do not realise that she really never has a thought for anyone but herself."

"She is very young, Aunt Grace, and all that will change when she loves. Undine has not found her soul yet."

"I wish she would," said Mrs. Pleydell, half laughing.

"It will come soon enough. When it does, you will lose her pretty, butterfly brightness for ever."

"If it were only that," said Mrs. Pleydell, slowly; "but she comes out sometimes with strange, cold bits of worldly wisdom, more appropriate to a dowager of sixty than a child of eighteen. And it is not, as I see you are going to suggest, that she has caught them up from others, and repeats them like

a parrot; she so evidently feels and believes them."

Tom looked grieved.

"Don't be hard upon her, Aunt Grace."

"Hard upon her! Tom, do you think it likely?"

"No—only, wasn't she awfully disappointed at being left behind, now? She's so much happier, she always says, in London than in the country, and she was so fond of her aunt."

"I believe," said Mrs. Pleydell, almost sharply, for she was vexed at finding it impossible to shake her nephew's infatuation; "indeed, I am almost sure that all Eve cared about was the amusement and indulgence, not the person who gave them to her. The idea of the tournament and dance at Beechmont seemed quite to reconcile her to staying at home, for she said there would be 'nothing going on here yet.'"

"Do you mean her to come here for a

long visit soon? She"—with a glance at his step-mother—"expects it."

"I am sorry she does. I have written as plainly as is possible to her, saying it cannot be. Eve must remain with me."

"But she writes that she means to come back for good."

"She persists in saying so, though she knows it is not likely. I think she is like a little child, and believes that, if she says a thing often enough, it must come to pass. I shall probably bring her to London for a time in the spring, but she will only go out with me. I have a perfect horror of the fast set in which she seems to have lived so much."

At this moment Mrs. William Pleydell claimed her sister-in-law's attention in order to impress upon her some point of which Iris did not seem sufficiently to appreciate the importance, and Tom had no further private conversation with his aunt that evening.

The next few days were spent in the necessary whirl of shopping, but one afternoon, as Mrs. Pleydell and Iris were resting after a long morning's work, they were astonished by the door being suddenly thrown open, and the waiter announcing,

“Sir Charles and Lady Netherleigh.”

Mrs. Pleydell had a good deal of self-control, but she could not conceal her extreme surprise as she went forward to greet her brother-in-law and his wife. Old Lady Netherleigh, who had so vehemently denounced her re-marriage, and her husband had been dead some years.

“You are surprised to see us, of course,” said Lady Netherleigh, a bright, pleasing-looking young woman; “and no wonder. I tell Charley the family behaved infamously to you, and we’ve been dying to say so, and make friends for ever so long, only—somehow, it’s so very difficult to do things in writing, and you’ve never been in London, so, when Aunt Rachel wrote us word that

you were coming up about this trousseau, I said to Charley, 'Now or never,' and we came up on purpose."

"It is very kind of you, and I am very glad indeed to see you," said Mrs. Pleydell, who had had time to recover herself during Lady Netherleigh's speech. "Pray do not refer to the past, but let us enjoy the present. I am glad Iris should make acquaintance with her relations;" and, with ready tact, she began to talk of Iris's prospects, and their business in London, occasionally asking her brother or sister-in-law's opinion on some trifling point, and putting them quite at their ease.

It required some determination to do it, for Sir Charles bore a strong resemblance to his brother, her adored Arthur, and it was often difficult to keep back the tears that would fill her eyes, or the choking that rose in her throat. But she struggled bravely, and when the Netherleighs took their leave, after a long visit, both sides felt that

there was the beginning of a real friendship.

Mrs. Pleydell had never felt any rancour against her brother-in-law ; she had never seen him before, for he was abroad with his regiment at the time of her marriage and of her return from India, and it was, as she felt, only natural that he should have acquiesced in the decision of the rest of his family respecting a sister-in-law of whom he knew absolutely nothing. It was very kind of young Lady Netherleigh to have insisted on making friends ; but the interview and the recollections it awakened had saddened Mrs. Pleydell a very great deal, and she was unusually silent during the evening.

Iris understood her mood and left her undisturbed. Her mother had never told her of the unkind treatment she had received from her husband's family, not wishing to set her against her relations in case she at any future time came in contact with them, but the girl had a vague idea that her mother

had been ill-used, and had felt indignant, and but little inclined to be conciliated till won over by the unaffectedly friendly manner of her uncle and aunt. Lady Netherleigh especially quite won her heart, and, while keeping silence so as not to disturb her mother's meditations, she was pleasing herself by thinking how delightful it was to have some relations. Hitherto she had known none, with the exception of Aunt Rachel.

She was soon destined to make acquaintance with some more, for, though the first week in October is not a propitious month for finding people in town, Lady Netherleigh, who was very energetic, and who professed herself absolutely fascinated by Iris's beauty and grace, disinterred various cousins, and had them all to dinner to meet Iris and her mother. Many of them Mrs. Pleydell had heard of from her husband, and, though glad for her daughter's sake that the reconciliation had taken place, and that she should take her proper position among her father's peo-

ple, it was exquisitely painful to her to be transported back again to the happy days when her Arthur had so often talked of introducing her to the relatives with whom, after so many years, she was but now making acquaintance.

This introduction to her father's family increased very largely Iris's list of presents, and some of the gifts were of a very magnificent description. Aunt Rachel wrote in great delight on hearing all that her niece had to relate, and she gave so good an account of Eve that Mrs. Pleydell ventured to extend the length of her absence by several days.

Both Sir Charles and Lady Netherleigh were most anxious that she and Iris should pay them a visit at Netherleigh before returning home, but to this she would not consent.

"There was a great deal to be done and seen to at home," she said. "If they would let her visit them later, she would be very

glad. She would like to stay with them, and also to see Netherleigh."

She did not say, what was the truth, that to see her Arthur's home, which he had loved so well, would be a pleasure so intermingled with pain that she feared it might unnerve her, and render her unfit for all the bustle attendant on the wedding. It was agreed that Sir Charles and Lady Netherleigh should come down for the ceremony, and that their two girls, aged respectively sixteen and twelve, should be bridesmaids.

Mrs. William Pleydell hardly approved of her sister-in-law's reconciliation with her husband's family. Now that Mrs. Pleydell's time was constantly taken up by some member of the Netherleigh family, and that Iris was being always carried off to drive with one cousin, or shop with another, she felt herself a person of comparatively little importance, a position of which she did not at all approve. She thought that, as Mrs. Pleydell had been so long absent from London, she

would have been only too glad to have someone to advise her, and was fully prepared to enjoy to the utmost the authority which her more intimate acquaintance with shops and fashions would surely give her.

So it was a terrible mortification to find her *protégée* carried off from her, and her place usurped by persons with whom she was not acquainted, though she would dearly have liked to be so. Her disappointment found vent in various sarcastic observations on her sister-in-law's "Christian meekness in taking up with people who had used her so ill," and when Mrs. Pleydell quietly remarked that Sir Charles and Lady Netherleigh had certainly not behaved ill to her, for she had never even seen them before, she rejoined that it was all very well talking, but they would never have come forward now or troubled themselves, if Iris were not going to make a good marriage.

Mrs. Pleydell did not reply: she believed much in the "soft answer which turneth away wrath," but she believed still more in many

instances in no answer at all. She allowed her sister-in-law to talk on till she was tired, and then quietly started another topic. She was considerably surprised that Mrs. William had as yet said nothing respecting Eve's return to her, which she affected in her letters to regard as a certainty. It was a relief, for she greatly disliked saying anything that might prove disagreeable, and yet, if Mrs. William had argued very much, she felt that she must tell her that she disapproved of the society into which Eve had been thrown, and that she had no intention of permitting her to re-enter it.

There now remained but two days of her stay in London, and, as nothing had yet been said, she hoped that her sister-in-law had at length realized that the refusal she had written so often and so decidedly was really intended, and that she had abandoned the idea of Eve's return. But this afternoon, when she was paying a solitary visit in Park Street, Iris having gone out driving with one of her

cousins, the attack which she had dreaded took place.

“Well, Grace, you have deprived me of the pleasure of seeing poor little Eve now, but of course it is only a pleasure deferred. When is she to come back to me?”

“You know, Louisa, I have written to you over and over again that I mean Eve to stay with me.”

“It is a breach of faith,” said Mrs. William, hotly; “you know you let me adopt her, you left me all the trouble of her bringing up, and now you refuse to let me enjoy the result. Besides, you promised.”

“I am very sorry indeed,” said Mrs. Pleydell, “more sorry, Louisa, than I can say that I ever acceded to your wish to have the child. I see now that I was wrong, that I ought never to have parted with her, but—you were in such terrible trouble, my heart ached so for your loss, that I thought of you rather than my child and my duty. Do not ask me to part from her again, Louisa, for indeed I cannot do it.”

“Then you throw your promise to the winds! And it is going against the child’s own wishes; she is dying to come back.”

“She misses the gaiety and excitement. I suppose it is natural she should find the country rather dull after the life of feverish dissipation which she represents herself as having led with you. But indeed I hope in time to reconcile her to a healthier life. She has as much amusement as is good for any girl, and, if all is well, I hope to bring her to London for a little while.”

“You have been buried in Coalshire so long that you have lost all taste for London, and dropped all your acquaintances. Why not let Eve come to me for the season, even if you refuse to keep your promise of letting her live with me altogether.”

Mrs. Pleydell felt that at last it would be better to speak out and make her meaning clear, instead of bearing continual attacks; so she said,

“Don’t be offended, Louisa, at what I am

going to say. I daresay you will call me very dull and old-fashioned; perhaps I am, but I cannot alter my feelings, and I can hardly tell you how much I dislike the slang, fast set in which Eve seems to have lived, and of which, I regret to say, she has caught the manners. While she is under my control, she shall never enter it again."

Mrs. William Pleydell turned scarlet. She prided herself immensely on her acquaintance, which she considered an exceedingly fashionable one, and was aghast at the idea of her sister-in-law, who was, she considered, quite a "country cousin," and who, even in her London days, had never striven after the "fashion" so dear to her own heart, presuming to disapprove of the set into which she had introduced her niece. She was so astonished that she remained silent, and, after a short pause, Mrs. Pleydell continued,

"I do not want to hurt your feelings, Louisa, by what I say. Believe me, I know you treated Eve precisely as if she were your own daughter,

and would never have permitted her to do anything or go anywhere that you thought in the least objectionable. But, as I said before, my views are different, and I mean to keep Eve as completely aloof from fast companionship as I can. I am sorry to say we are so close to Beechmont that I have not been able to prevent her seeing a good deal of Lady Hildegarde Becher, who is, to my mind, a far from desirable companion. However, they have not been at Beechmont for four years, and very likely may not come again for as long a period."

"I wonder what you would have better," said Mrs. William, wonderingly. "Lady Beechmont is one of the leaders of society, and most difficult to know. Her balls are the best in London, and I thought I had done wonders for Eve when I achieved the acquaintance, and, above all, when Lady Hildegarde took her up so. Lord Rootley was a great deal about her at one time, and I thought it very promising. Is there anything between them now?"

“Certainly not. My dear Louisa, Eve is only eighteen, and very young of her age, it would be dreadful even to think of her marrying yet! She is terribly ignorant, and, what is worse, she has no wish to be otherwise.”

“Ah!” said Mrs. William, with some satisfaction, “that is my doing. I was determined her prospects should never be spoilt by learning too much. Nothing men hate so much as a girl who knows as much as they do about anything. Besides, girls who read much get views’ about things into their heads, and they *will* talk about them and argue, and that is fatal, they never marry—at least not well. No, I was determined Eve should know nothing that they call solid, but I took pains with her music, and singing, and dancing, and was very particular about her learning how to write pretty notes, and to understand all about a *menu*. There was no need to teach her anything about clothes and colours, it came to her naturally. I do hope, Grace, you’re not

spoiling the girl by making her learn things."

"I am trying to get a little useful knowledge into her head, certainly, but I am afraid it is very doubtful whether she absorbs any of it. I make her read aloud to me, but I am not at all sure that she takes in the sense of what she reads."

"Poor child! No wonder she writes so piteously about wanting to come back."

"I wish you would not encourage her. I have told her from the first that it is not to be, and yet she persists in talking of it."

"She believed in your promise, you see."

"If there were any promise—and I cannot say I think there ever was a distinct one—it was that her uncle might adopt her—that is out of the question now."

"Ah!" said Mrs. William, with a sigh, "if only that crash had been postponed three months I am sure I should have had my reward, and have seen Eve make a really good marriage. I never saw any girl her equal in flirtation. She was always so cool and com-

posed, able to take advantage of everything, and to play one man off against another. Poor dear! I am very sorry; and now, buried in the country, of course she will have no chances."

"Iris, who has never left it, is going to make an excellent marriage, with the additional advantage that it is one of pure affection," said Mrs. Pleydell, smiling. "Besides, supposing even that Eve never married at all, is there anything so very dreadful in that? Tell me, have you heard of your husband lately? Of course I do not ask where he is, but is he well?"

"Yes, I believe so. He seldom writes; there would be risk," said Mrs. William, hastily.

"I must go now; it is getting dark, and Iris will be wondering what has become of me," said Mrs. Pleydell, rising.

"And it is definitive that I am not to have Eve?"

"Yes, indeed it must be so. And, Louisa, I cannot say how much obliged to you I shall be

if you will make the child see that it is so, instead of encouraging her in the belief that I may yield. I assure you there is no chance of my doing so."

"Well, I think I am very ill-used, and Eve too. I shall see you and Iris again before you go?"

"Yes, if possible; but to-morrow is our last day, and, though we have tried not to put things off, there is a great deal still to be done. Good-bye, in case it should not be possible to come."

As Mrs. Pleydell was leaving the house, she encountered in the hall a tall man who had just been admitted. He drew back into the shadow to let her pass, but she perceived that he had a short, thick black beard and a profusion of black hair. She would hardly have given him a second thought, but, while the butler was assisting her to put on her fur-cloak, the footman preceded the guest to the drawing-room, and before the door closed she heard her sister-in-law say,

“Remember, James,—not at home to anyone.”

“Some matter of business, no doubt,” Mrs. Pleydell thought, dismissed the matter from her mind, and pondered over all that had been said respecting Eve.

As she had feared, the girl had been carefully educated to consider a good marriage the sole end and aim of life, and had proved only too apt a pupil of her worldly aunt. It was not without considerable anxiety that the mother looked forward to her child’s future, and determined that when they were left alone together she would make her her constant companion, and do all that lay in her power to counteract the evil influences to which, owing to her neglect of Aunt Rachel’s advice, she had allowed her to become exposed.

It was late, nearly half-past six, the next day when Mrs. Pleydell and Iris had finished all they had to do and went to wish Mrs. William Pleydell “Good-bye.”

As their hansom turned into Park Street,

they saw a gentleman enter the house, and Mrs. Pleydell at once recognised him as the visitor she had met when leaving the day before. She was therefore not much surprised to hear the answer, "Not at home;" but, as they drove back to the hotel, she wondered what important business her sister-in-law was transacting.

CHAPTER VI.

When once the young heart of a maiden is stolen,
The maiden herself will steal after it soon.

Ill Omens. MOORE.

WHEN Eve found herself left alone with Miss Netherleigh, she took it into her whimsical little head to charm the old lady, and convince her that all the complaints which she felt sure her mother had made of her were really without foundation. Miss Netherleigh had a very shrewd insight into character, and Eve hardly deceived her so thoroughly as she hoped and intended. Aunt Rachel was not blind to the girl's vanity, selfishness, and worldliness, but she was to a certain extent

deceived by the soft, caressing manner and childish innocence which Eve could assume at will, and was willing to regard these faults as incidental to her unfortunate education rather than fundamental to her character, while she totally failed to realise the cold heartlessness of her nature.

Eve was well aware of Miss Netherleigh's rigid notions of propriety, and, true to her intention of charming her, was far more careful both in her conversations and actions than was generally the case, so that, after observing her narrowly, the old lady was inclined to believe precisely what the girl wished, that "dear Grace, in her great anxiety, had been unnecessarily alarmed, and that the child had taken less harm than might have been anticipated from the fast set into which Mrs. William Pleydell (for whom Aunt Rachel had always entertained a strong aversion) had introduced her at so ridiculously early an age."

Acting on this opinion, Miss Netherleigh allowed Eve more latitude in the matter of

going to Beechmont than she would otherwise have done, thereby exactly fulfilling that astute damsel's wishes.

The tournament duly came off. It was a lovely day, the gathering a very large one, and Eve's vanity was gratified not only by winning the prize, a very handsome bracelet, but also by the many compliments paid her on her excellent and most graceful play. Colonel Leybourne, who was paying a second visit to Beechmont, was most devoted to her; but it was Eve's pleasure that day to be on her very best behaviour, and even Miss Netherleigh could see no fault to be found with her.

Lord Rootley noted the change, and wondered whether it were the sobering effect of finding herself on the brink of a real scrape that had quieted her; and even Laurence, who was present to please his mother, though he declared it bored him inexpressibly to go to such a party when there was no chance of meeting Iris, and who generally disapproved utterly of Eve—partly, perhaps, because she

laughed at him—was quite surprised at her quietness, and was unusually attentive to her in consequence.

In her heart Eve hated both him and Lord Rootley; the one had ventured to lecture and extract a promise from her just when she believed that the hour of her triumph was at hand, and that she was about to have the pleasure of refusing the man who had dared to express disapproval of her proceedings at Maidenhead; the other had betrayed her to Iris, and caused her to receive what she called “an awful scolding.” It was thus that Eve, who in her aunt’s house had never heard a word of reproof, but had been allowed, or indeed encouraged, to think everything she did was perfect, always characterized the mildest attempt at remonstrance.

But she carefully concealed her feelings, talked to Lord Rootley as naturally as if they had never had that, to him, extremely unpleasant *tête-à-tête*, and caused him to think that she was showing more sense than he had believed

that she possessed ; and made herself so charming to Laurence by the way she talked of Iris and listened to all his plans for the future, that he felt quite astonished at himself for never having properly appreciated her before. He wondered rather whether Iris had spoken to her of what he had seen ; if she had, evidently Eve bore no malice, and he dismissed all thought of the matter for the infinitely pleasanter consideration and discussion of his own affairs.

There was a good deal of gaiety going on in the neighbourhood at the moment, and to all the parties Miss Netherleigh took Eve, and she and Laurence became at each better friends. Mrs. Furnivall looked on with disapproval. Perhaps she hardly herself realised what it was she wished. She could hardly have desired that her son, within a month of his wedding-day, should find some one whom she thought more suitable, and forfeit his word. She would have been indignant if the idea had been suggested to her, yet she would have liked to see

him devote himself to anyone rather than to Eve, because such devotion seemed to bind him more firmly to Iris.

Several days had elapsed since the tournament before Eve paid the visit to the oak by the river mentioned in a former chapter. Her state of mind, as she rowed rapidly homewards, would be impossible to describe—indeed, she hardly knew herself what she felt. Indignation, astonishment, bewilderment, anger that Lord Rootley and Laurence should have been right, and she herself wrong, all possessed her in turn, and drowned for a time the misery of mortification and disappointed love. Perhaps the former was the stronger of the two. How he must have laughed at her—she who never could endure ridicule—for believing all he had told her! How he had deceived her!—she who prided herself so on her acuteness, and on always knowing whether people were telling her the truth or not. And he knew quite well that she loved him! She had made no secret of it, she had felt so sure of him. Well, it

served her right for falling in love at all ; she had always known it was ridiculous ; something bad was sure to come of it. Well, she was cured for ever. She hated him—yes, hated him with all her heart now ; and, by way of proving how decidedly this was the case, she began to sob as if her heart would break at the thought of never seeing him again.

No one who saw Eve that night at a dance at the barracks, would have guessed what an exciting experience had been hers that afternoon, but many observed that she was even prettier than was her wont. Her face seemed to have gained in expression, her eyes to have a greater depth and softness. It was but an illustration of the old truth that no woman's face reaches its perfection of beauty, attains in short its highest capability of loveliness, until she has suffered. And though Eve's nature was extremely shallow, and her sufferings would in all probability not be of long duration, still for a time they were very bitter. Her trouble gave her for a few days a sort of

languid softness that was very bewitching, but it was also partially occasioned by her not feeling very well.

Miss Netherleigh pronounced that she had a slight cold, and forbade any more rowing, and Eve acceded with a gentleness that both surprised and delighted her. She little guessed that the very thought of the river was odious to the girl, and that she was quite thankful for an excuse for not going there on her usual days. It seemed to her guilty conscience that if she gave up her rowing without any ostensible reason, it must cause suspicion and give a clue to her secret.

It was three or four days before she received a letter from Claud Urban, written from London. After some expressions of dismay that such an occurrence as that under the oak should ever have taken place, he continued,

“Do not, my darling Eve, condemn me unheard. I am bad enough, but not so bad as

you think me. I need not say I have no wife. It is too long a story to write you now, I would rather tell it when we meet, which must be soon. Write me one word, my darling, to say that you believe me; you wrung my heart that day when you rowed away without a word, though you were right and I could not wonder. There are many things I must say to you: can you suggest any plan of meeting *at once*?

“Yours ever,—CLAUD.”

This letter reached Eve two days before her mother's return home, and excited her extremely. So great a shock had been given to her confidence, however, that she was by no means prepared to accept it without reserve. Was it true, she wondered? It was very strange. The woman had certainly claimed him for her husband. Was that true?

Eve mused and pondered; her love urged her to believe him, and to write as he entreated, her pride bidding her take no

notice of the letter at all. Pride was in the ascendant for the whole of the first day; on the second, love and not a little curiosity became overwhelming, and she wrote,

“I will meet you at Euston Square to-morrow at one o’clock. We shall have half an hour.”

The plan which Eve had arranged was as follows. Mrs. Pleydell and Iris were to leave Euston at half-past one, and all her luggage was to be taken from Miss Netherleigh’s to the station, which was not far off, so that all might go home together in the omnibus. If she reached London at one, she might see Claud, hear his explanations, slip unobserved into the train by which her mother was to travel, and appear on the platform of Banner-ton, which was always crowded, as if she had come there to meet them.

All was apparently easy, except accounting to Aunt Rachel for her absence the whole day; for her train, an express, started at

half-past nine. However, she must try to arrange it, and so the night before, when they were sitting quietly at home, she began.

“Aunt Rachel” (Eve had always steadfastly refused to call Miss Netherleigh by this title, but had adopted it during her stay as part of her scheme of propitiation), “I want very much to go home the very first thing to-morrow. I want to get some flowers, and make the rooms pretty, just as mummy likes them.”

“Very well, my dear; but surely the afternoon will be time enough.”

“Well, if it is a fine day I thought I should like a row. You know, my cold is quite well again now” (this was hardly the case, for Eve felt very poorly, and her throat was extremely sore), “and it would be very nice. Then I could put the rooms straight and come in the carriage to meet them at the station.”

It all sounded very plausible, and, though Miss Netherleigh could not understand why

Eve was in such a very great hurry that she could not wait till the middle of the morning, she thought it was only juvenile impatience, and was not very much surprised, when she came down to breakfast as usual as the clock struck ten, to hear that "Miss Eve had had breakfast at nine, and had set off to walk to the Gate House."

"To walk, Evans! Are you quite sure? I thought I understood that she had ordered the pony-carriage to come for her."

"No," Evans was quite sure she had gone on foot, and Miss Netherleigh, though vexed that the girl should have given herself needless exertion when certainly somewhat weak and languid with her cold, comforted herself by thinking that the day was so lovely that she could hardly do herself much harm.

Mrs. Pleydell and Iris were to arrive at a quarter-past five, and Mrs. Pleydell had written to say that she thought they had better not call to see Aunt Rachel that evening, but that they would come in and spend the next day

with her: Eve had better meet them at the station, and they could all go home together. It was therefore with infinite surprise that, about half-past five, Miss Netherleigh saw the door thrown open and heard Evans announce,

“Mrs. Pleydell and Miss Iris Netherleigh.”

“My dear Grace, this is an unexpected pleasure.”

“We cannot stay, for we are only come to fetch Eve,” said Mrs. Pleydell. “How could she have misunderstood what I said about her meeting us at the station? We should not have come in, but Evans said she was not here, so I wanted to find out from you where she is.”

“At the Gate House, I imagine,” said Miss Netherleigh, and detailed the programme Eve had recited to her the night before.

“It is very strange. Robert thought she was here,” said Mrs. Pleydell, in much perplexity.

Miss Netherleigh rang the bell.

“Evans,” she said, “ask Mrs. Pleydell’s servant if Miss Eve was not at the Gate House when he left.”

Evans returned immediately.

“No, ma’am, Miss Eve has not been there to-day.”

“Then where in the world can she be?” exclaimed Mrs. Pleydell, anxiously.

“Go up to her room, Iris,” said Aunt Rachel, “and see if she has left anything about.”

“You don’t think she has gone away and left a note?” exclaimed Mrs. Pleydell, turning pale.

“I am sure she has left nothing on the table, or Jane would have brought it to me,” said Miss Netherleigh; “but one never knows. Look in the drawers, Iris, and in the blotting-book.”

While Iris was absent, Mrs. Pleydell asked innumerable questions as to whom Eve had seen and what she had done, and Miss Netherleigh gave the fullest details, not omitting to tell

her niece that she thought she had been rather hard upon Eve, who was much nicer than she had ever represented her to be. Upon these remarks Mrs Pleydell broke in with,

“How stupid of me not to think of it before ! Of course she has gone to Beechmont, and has forgotten all about meeting us while she was amusing herself !”

“Then she must be alone with Lady Imogene and Lord Rootley,” said Miss Netherleigh : “and, you know, that is not in the least likely. The Beechmonts and Lady Hildegarde went two days ago to stay at the Duke of Myrtleshire’s for two balls, and return home on Saturday. I confess I cannot think where Eve can be, but I do not see why you should fancy that anything very dreadful has happened to her.”

“You said,” said Mrs. Pleydell, starting to her feet : “oh ! Aunt Rachel, you said she meant to go on the river. That boat ! There may have been an accident ! She may be drowned !”

“My dear Grace, think for a moment, and don’t be a goose! You heard just now that she had not been at the Gate House to-day, so she could not have got at the boat. I grant she is a very troublesome and naughty child, and deserves to be well whipped for disappearing and frightening you like this; but depend upon it she is quite well and safe somewhere. You are sure you didn’t miss her at the station?”

“Oh, yes, quite. The train was very punctual, and we thought she might be a little late, and waited till everyone was gone. What can Iris be doing? She has been an hour!”

“Not quite ten minutes,” said Miss Netherleigh, glancing at the clock. “Iris is thorough in everything, and will be sure not to leave a corner unexplored. Ah! what is it?” she exclaimed, sharply, as Iris appeared at the door as white as a sheet, and with a blotting-book in her hands.

“It is—oh, I am afraid!” stammered Iris.

"Oh, mamma, forgive me. I ought to have told you, but I wanted to save you pain. Laurence knows, and indeed she promised not to see or write to him again."

"Not to see Laurence?" cried her mother, in a bewildered tone, and Miss Netherleigh said, almost angrily,

"Iris, it is not like you to talk in that confused way. Say at once what you mean, and don't frighten your mother into fits; she is upset enough already."

Thus adjured, Iris, standing in the centre of the room between her mother and aunt, strove to repeat exactly what Laurence had told her, and what had passed between her and Eve, but she was so nervous and upset that her narrative was far from clear.

"I don't understand a word of it," cried Miss Netherleigh, testily. "Who is the man? where did she meet him? is he married? And what in the world has Lord Rootley got to do with it? What have you found in the blotting-book? Perhaps that may help us."

But there was nothing but the few lines in Eve's somewhat sprawling hand.

"I will meet you at Euston Square to-morrow at one o'clock. We shall have half an hour.

"EVE."

No sign of the address of the envelope; if she had blotted that, it had evidently not been on a blank page.

"She must have gone to London by the 9.30," said Miss Netherleigh. "All that story about going home to gather flowers to make the rooms pretty for you must just have been so much dust thrown in my eyes. Grace, my dear, I beg your pardon for thinking I knew your daughter better than you did. You are quite right, and she is a heartless little minx! Still we must find out where she is. Ring the bell, Iris. Evans, go to the station and ask quietly—don't make any fuss—whether anyone saw Miss Eve go by the train this morning,

and where she took her ticket for. We think she may have gone to meet Mrs. Pleydell and missed her."

Evans disappeared, and shortly returned with the intelligence that a lady very like Miss Eve, but the clerk could not be quite sure, she wore such a thick veil, had taken a return ticket for London and gone by the 9.30.

"A return ticket—then she may come by the next train," said Miss Netherleigh. "Grace, you had better stay here to-night. No?" as Mrs. Pleydell shook her head. "Well, at any rate wait for the last train. And now, Iris,"—turning to her—"sit down there and try to tell us a little more clearly what you know and what you suspect."

So Iris told the tale over again, and felt bitterly her mother's reproaches for not having told her at once.

"I wanted to save you the pain, mamma," she said, with the tears in her eyes.

"I am sure you meant well, Iris; but I did

not think you would have shown such want of judgment. It was your plain duty to tell me anything of such importance at once. If you had, this would probably never have occurred. If anything terrible happens to poor Eve, the responsibility will be yours."

Iris did not answer, but she turned very pale, and her eyes filled with tears. Miss Netherleigh thought her niece unnecessarily harsh, but she made allowances for the cruelty inseparable from terror, and said nothing, though she took Iris's hand in hers and pressed it kindly. It was almost more than the girl could bear. She was terrified beyond measure at Eve's disappearance, reproached herself far more bitterly than her mother could possibly do for having kept silence, though it was with the best possible motive, and yet felt that it was unjust of her mother not to acknowledge that she had acted for the best, and to save her pain and annoyance. She had hardly ever before heard words of reproof from her mother's lips, and it was with infinite difficulty that she choked back

the tears that filled her eyes and the sobs that rose in her throat. She returned the pressure of Aunt Rachel's hand with a fervour that gave that lady exquisite pain, but she guessed what the girl was suffering, and endured it stoically.

There were three hours that must elapse before the last train would reach Bannerton, and it seemed as if the time would never pass. The carriage was put up, and Miss Netherleigh insisted on their taking off their things and sitting down to dinner, but it was a most dismal meal, and Mrs. Pleydell kept her eyes fixed upon the clock till the hands seemed to her to stand persistently still. But when the train at length arrived there was no Eve.

"The return-ticket must have been a blind," exclaimed Mrs. Pleydell, bursting into tears. "Oh! Aunt Rachel, what is to be done? How are we to save the poor misguided child?"

"She evidently intended to return," said Miss Netherleigh, "or she would not have said

‘we shall have half an hour;’ she meant to return by your train.”

“But she has not. That wretch must have persuaded her to go with him! Oh! my child! my child! if I had but known the danger that threatened you! if I had but been upon my guard!”

“Grace,” said Miss Netherleigh, gravely, “there is no use in reproaching Iris now. She committed an error in judgment, and is as sorry for it now as you can be. What is to be thought of now is how to find Eve. You cannot telegraph from here—it will make the affair too public. Could you take the mail to-night, telegraph to your nephew, Mr. Pleydell, to meet you at Euston, and do what he advises? If you are equal to it, it would be the wisest plan, and would waste the least time. Iris had better stay with me.”

“Oh! let me go with mamma. She will be so tired,” pleaded Iris.

“I think you had better stay here,” replied her mother. “You could not help, and I should

do better alone. Write the telegram for me. 'Please meet me at Euston 3 a.m. to-morrow, Thursday. Necessity urgent.'"

The telegram was despatched, but Mrs. Pleydell could not rest, the minutes seemed hours to her; she insisted on being at the station fully an hour before the time, and paced up and down the platform with hurried steps. Iris walked at her side, but did not attempt to break silence. She felt that her mother was too wretched to be just, and was herself too disturbed and miserable about Eve to think of the vehemence of her mother's reproaches. Her pale, sad face at length struck Mrs. Pleydell, and putting her hand on her daughter's arm, she said,

"I spoke strongly, Iris dear, and of course you were wrong. You should never, even with the best intentions, have concealed anything so serious, but I quite know you meant it for the best, and to save me pain. But, dear, it only shows that one must never do evil that good may come."

Iris's eyes overflowed, and, the train coming up before she could trust her voice, she kissed her mother in silence as they parted.

CHAPTER VII.

Of all the agonies in life, that which is the most poignant and harrowing—that which for the time annihilates reason, and leaves our whole organization one lacerated, mangled heart—is the conviction that we have been deceived where we placed all the trust of love.

BULWER LYTTON.

By foreign hands thy dying eyes were clos'd,
 By foreign hands thy decent limbs compos'd,
 By foreign hands thy humble grave adorn'd,
 By strangers honour'd, and by strangers mourn'd.

Elegy to the Memory of an Unfortunate Lady. POPE.

TOM PLEYDELL was sitting over the fire smoking and thinking of Eve, while pretending to himself that he was reading the paper. He knew as well as his aunt could

do that his chance of winning Eve was but small. No one knew better than he how much she valued wealth and all the luxury and pleasure that are unattainable without it, and his estimate of himself was far too humble for him to hope for a moment that she would ever love him well enough to accept poverty for his sake.

And yet he loved her passionately. He was blind to the faults that her mother saw so clearly, and put so plainly before him, and was inclined to fear that his darling did not meet with all the love and adoration in her home which he considered were her due. Her mother loved her of course, still she hardly seemed to appreciate her charms and sweetness, and really spoke as if the child were cold and heartless. Perhaps it was right that Eve should be in her own mother's house, still he hoped she did not very sorely miss all the love that had been so demonstratively showered upon her in Hyde Park Gardens. Perhaps his step-mo-

ther was not the wisest of women; perhaps she had indulged Eve too much, and let her do things and go to places which would have been better let alone, but she had never thwarted her; and, kind as he had always himself found his Aunt Grace, he feared that she was too strict with Eve, and was making her unhappy. What other explanation could there be of her evident belief that the child was not of an affectionate disposition? little loving Eve, who was always overflowing with smiles and kisses to everyone who was kind to her.

Tom forgot that he had never seen Eve thwarted, or told to do anything that she did not like, and would have been amazed could he have seen the sullen frown that, at the Gate House, so often clouded the countenance which he believed to be perennially sunny. In fact he was very genuinely and thoroughly in love, and was honestly blind to any imperfections in his idol, in spite of all that her mother had said to him.

It had been a cruel blow her having been left at Bannerton. From the moment that he had heard of Mrs. Pleydell's intended visit to London, he had made sure of seeing Eve, and though he told himself incessantly that he had no hopes, that, even if he could, he would not say a word that could doom his bright, blithe little bird to a life of poverty which he knew she would hate, yet he had longed feverishly to see her again, to feast his eyes on her beauty, to hear the laughing voice—which was to him the sweetest music on earth—call him “dear old Tom,” and it had been a very dire disappointment when, on his arrival in Park Street, he had found only Mrs. Pleydell and Iris.

Of course he was foolish! No one knew it better than he! He was the last person in the world to expect that Eve, fascinating, bewitching Eve, would wait for him. It would be a weary waiting! He was but a clerk, and though Mr. Mallison, the head of the firm he had entered, knew all his circum-

stances, and favoured him to the utmost of his power, still his outlook in life was but a poor one.

Before he would be in a position to make much money, he would in all probability be an old, grey-haired man, and, when even that point was reached, there were all his father's debts to be paid to the uttermost farthing before he could think of happiness for himself. And years, long years before that time Eve would be married to some one who could give her all that she delighted in—wealth, position, rank.— Well, none could adorn them better than she! If only he could know her happy, could be privileged to watch her from a distance enjoying herself and dazzling the world as she would love to do, he felt that he could be, in a manner, content. He pictured himself as an old man going to see her, taking her children on his knee, tracing their likeness to the face he loved so well.

From such dreams he was roused by a sharp

peal of the door-bell, and in a few moments his landlady entered with Mrs. Pleydell's telegram. Its contents sorely puzzled Tom. He had seen his aunt the evening before, he knew she was to leave town that very day, and it was plain she had done so, as the telegram was dated from Bannerton. That it could have anything to do with Eve he naturally never for one moment suspected: she was at Bannerton, and could therefore have no concern in an emergency that brought her mother back to London so few hours after having quitted it.

He rang the bell, and, on his landlady's appearance, he began,

"I am very sorry, Mrs. Morris, but this telegram asks me to meet a lady—my aunt—at Euston at three to-morrow morning. Will you be good enough to leave the door on the latch? I will be scrupulously careful in putting up the chain, you may be sure."

"Well, for *you*, Mr. Pleydell," answered Mrs. Morris, graciously: "I'm sure you're that quiet and careful as it was never so! Else the door

on the latch is what I can't abide nohow. I lies thinking we'll all be murdered or burnt in our beds, which there's an awful murder in the paper to-night, sir, if you'd like to see it. I'll bring it up in a minute."

"No, thank you, Mrs. Morris, not to-night. I shall sit up till it is time to start, so I hope nothing will happen. I shall be on guard, you know. Good night."

Mrs. Morris retired, and Tom fell to musing once more over the telegram, but, having no clue, he naturally could make no guess as to what had occurred. It was, therefore, a terrible shock when, as he handed his aunt out of the train and inquired what was the matter, he received for answer,

"Oh! Tom, it is Eve. She is missing."

"Eve! My God!" cried poor Tom, staggering back; then recovering himself with an immense effort. "How? When?" and, hesitatingly: "Who?"

"We suppose a Mr. Esmond," and Mrs. Pleydell gave a rapid sketch of all the story and

circumstances so far as she knew them. All this had passed as they were standing on the platform. Tom now drew her into the waiting-room.

“Wait here a few minutes, Aunt Grace,” he said; “I must see one of the inspectors and try to find out if anyone saw Eve. It is just possible.”

After much inquiry and an interval that seemed hours to Mrs. Pleydell, but that really was not much more than twenty minutes, the following information was produced:—

The Bannerton train, due at one o'clock, had been twenty-five minutes late, so that probably Eve had stepped out of the up train on one side of the station, while her mother and sister were tranquilly seated in the down one on the other. One of the porters deposed that a young lady, very fair and pretty, had waited till everyone was gone, and had hung about on the platform as if she were waiting for something. That he had asked if he could get her a cab, and she had said “No; she was waiting

for a friend, and was going away by the 1.30." That he had rejoined that she could not do that, for it had been gone a good twenty minutes, and that she had given a kind of cry and looked white and skeered like. That he had been called off to some work the other side of the station, but that half an hour later he had seen her going out of the station by herself.

"By herself!" exclaimed Mrs. Pleydell, when Tom had reported this. "Oh! Tom, ask him if he is quite sure."

On re-examination it proved that the man was anything but certain, and, on his appealing to one of his comrades, the referee at once expressed his opinion that he had seen the young lady leaving "along of a tall, dark gent."

Mrs. Pleydell wrung her hands in despair.

"Oh! Tom, Tom, what are we to do?"

"Let me take you somewhere—the hotel you left yesterday would be best until you can go to Park Street. I will go to Scotland Yard as soon as I have seen you safe. You know, Aunt

"Grace, I am as anxious as you can be."

Mrs. Pleydell was so exhausted with fatigue and wretchedness that she allowed her nephew to take her where he pleased, only saying, when he left her,

"You will never rest till you find her, Tom? Poor wretched child, how little she knows what she is doing!"

Tom promised, and set off in a hansom to Scotland Yard. His story was listened to, notes taken, and an officer sent at once to Euston Square to extract any more information that might be obtained from the officials there. Tom went to his lodgings, had a bath and dressed, wrote a note to Mr. Mallison, saying that private business of the most urgent importance detained him, but that he would be at the office as soon as was possible, and then set out to walk to Mrs. Pleydell's hotel.

Hitherto he had hardly had time to reflect on the story that his aunt had told him; all the energies of his mind had been concentrated on the means by which Eve might be traced

and recovered ; but now, as he walked slowly along the gradually awakening streets, he had ample time for meditation. His thoughts were far from pleasant.

It appeared that Eve had not only been carrying on a clandestine flirtation under colour of solitary boating excursions, but that she had continued to do so after she had been warned that the man she was secretly meeting was supposed to be married. It seemed absolutely inconceivable. One thing was clear : in his thoughts he had done Iris Netherleigh grave injustice ; he had fancied that she was hard on Eve, perhaps jealous of her (in his infatuation poor Tom thought no one could be Eve's equal), and it was clear that she had been kind—nay, *too* kind ; for, if she had been less so, she would not have kept the girl's secret, and this last terrible catastrophe would doubtless have been prevented.

But what a new idea this story gave him of Eve ! He had always thought her so guileless, so incapable of deception. He did not reflect

that when he knew her in Hyde Park Gardens there was no necessity for her to conceal anything; if she had said she wished to meet anyone, she would have been allowed to do it. Where had she met this man? He had a remarkably accurate memory for names, and was fairly certain that there was no Mr. Esmond on his step-mother's visiting list, nor among Eve's partners. And yet clearly he was unknown to Mrs. Pleydell, so Eve could not have made his acquaintance at Bannerton.

He was quite shocked, when he reached the hotel, to see how ill his aunt looked.

"Dear Aunt Grace, you will be quite worn out. Have you had any breakfast?"

"Oh, no, Tom—I want nothing but to hear of Eve."

Tom saw it would be of no use to insist on her own want of food, so he said,

"Well, I am glad you have not finished, for I am very hungry," and, ringing the bell, ordered that the meal should be brought up; then, sitting down by his aunt, he told her

what had been done, and that he had directed that any information should be sent to Park Street.

“Oh! Tom, why? I should hear it sooner here.”

“I want you to go there, Aunt Grace. Perhaps we may get some light thrown on the matter. Tell me, how do you think Eve made this Mr. Esmond’s acquaintance?”

“I haven’t an idea. I suppose he was one of her London friends, and followed her down to Coalshire.”

“I don’t think she knew anyone of the name. You see, I watched her so earnestly, I think I know everyone who ever came near her.”

“But then—how could it be? It couldn’t be at Bannerton; she has been nowhere without me, except a few times to Beechmont, and I know no one of the name was there. Besides, Iris says Lord Rootley warned her against him.”

“Eve must know something he and Mr.

Furnivall do not. She must *know* he is not married."

"God grant it; but oh! Tom, you are infatuated, and, I know, think I am hard upon the child, but she is so wilful, and, as it seems to me, so absolutely devoid of principle! I cannot tell you how terrified I am. I believe if she really took a fancy into her head, as she must have done, believed she was in love, she—she would not care."

"No, no, it can't be so. Don't say it, don't think it!" groaned Tom. "It is impossible but that she knows that all is right."

"Does this carefully-arranged plan for deceiving Miss Netherleigh look like it? How deliberately she schemed to get a day's start!"

"But she meant to return—she took a return ticket; she told the porter she was going by the 1.30 to Bannerton."

Mrs. Pleydell shook her head.

"It may be so, Tom; but I confess it all seems to me part of the deception. She never had any intention of returning."

"Then why did that letter say, 'we shall have half an hour'?" asked Tom. "You see," he continued, almost triumphantly, as Mrs. Pleydell remained silent, "she must have meant to return."

"Perhaps so—but she did not," said the mother, with a weary sigh. "He must have persuaded her to go with him. I fear it was anything but a difficult task."

"One of the porters was very certain that no one met her, and that she left the station alone," said Tom. "I really don't see why he isn't just as likely to be right as the other fellow."

"Because his story is the least probable."

"It is always the improbable things that happen, Aunt Grace!" and he suddenly sprang from his chair. "Is it possible she can be in Park Street? She would naturally go there if—if she did not meet anybody."

"But surely Louisa would have telegraphed to me. She must have known the agonising anxiety I must be enduring."

"Let us go to Park Street, at all events," said Tom; "I said any information was to be sent there. Aunt Grace, you—you won't be hard upon Eve?"

He said it in an imploring tone that went to Mrs. Pleydell's heart.

"I am sorry for you, Tom," she could not help saying; "but some good will come out of this misery if it cures you of your infatuation. Hard upon her! I hardly think I am likely to be that; I feel as if I should be too thankful to see her safe."

Not a word was spoken in the hansom that conveyed them to Park Street, but to Mrs. Pleydell's astonishment the answer to Tom's inquiry was,

"Miss Eve, sir? Yes, she came about three o'clock yesterday."

"Thank God!" exclaimed Mrs. Pleydell, fervently. The relief of finding her child safe was so great and unexpected that she almost fainted.

"I will go at once and stop inquiries," said

Tom, as he handed her out. "When I have done so I will come back; you will not be gone just yet," and, springing into the hansom, he drove off to Scotland Yard.

Meanwhile Mrs. Pleydell, somewhat bewildered at the sudden relief to her feelings, followed the butler into the dining-room, where Mrs. William Pleydell and Eve were lingering over their breakfast.

"Mummy!" exclaimed Eve, colouring.

"Grace! well, this is a surprise!" exclaimed her sister-in-law.

"I came to find Eve," said Mrs. Pleydell, very gravely.

"I told her it was very naughty of her to come without leave," said Mrs. William. "However, she said she could really live no longer without seeing me. It was a sudden impulse, dear child! I was going to write to you to-day to say I really must keep her."

"Did Eve really pretend she came up to see you, Louisa?" asked Mrs. Pleydell, gravely.

"Of course! Why, what else should have brought her?" asked Mrs. William, in astonishment.

"What else *could* I have come for, mamma?" asked Eve, innocently.

"Did she ask you to meet her at Euston Square at one o'clock and say you would have half an hour together?" inquired Mrs. Pleydell.

For one moment she had a wild hope that it might be so, that Eve might really have been silly enough to come up to see her aunt, and have been over-persuaded to stay. But the hope faded as Eve gave a guilty start and coloured crimson, and Mrs. William Pleydell exclaimed,

"Ask me to meet her! What do you mean, Grace? I never knew anything of her coming till she walked in here at three o'clock and said, dear child! that she could not live without me any longer."

"Her journey was not taken to see you," said Mrs. Pleydell. "Perhaps you can tell me

something of the gentleman whom, I believe, she wished to meet, but who, as she is here safe and alone, I suppose failed her—a Mr. Esmond?”

Eve gave a half articulate cry.

“Mr. Esmond?” said Mrs. William. “No—not to my knowledge. But you say Eve came to meet him? It must be some one with whom she has made acquaintance at Banner-ton, for I don’t know anyone of the name, and neither did she. What does it all mean?”

“It appears that Eve has been in the habit of meeting him on the river. Our neighbour, Lord Rootley, Lord Beechmont’s son, became aware of it, and unfortunately, from mistaken kindness, refrained from telling me, but warned her that Mr. Esmond was supposed to be married, and made her promise not to meet him again. However, she broke her word, for it seems Laurence saw him kissing her in the grounds of the cottage he had on the river, and told Iris, who, from a mistaken wish not to pain me,

promised to say nothing if Eve would neither see nor write to him again. He left the country two days after. Yesterday Eve made an excuse to Miss Netherleigh that she wanted to go home the first thing to gather flowers and prepare the rooms for me. Instead of this she came up to London, having previously written the note of which I told you. Imagine my dismay, on reaching home, when she was nowhere to be found! I never once thought of her being with you; I should have thought you would have felt for my anxiety and have telegraphed instantly! After searching for any trace of her, and finding the impression of the note on the blotting-paper, and hearing that some one very like her, but wearing so thick a veil that the clerk could not be sure, had taken a ticket for London, I telegraphed to Tom to meet me, and came up by the mail. We questioned the porters, Tom went to Scotland Yard and set the detectives to work, and, after all, Eve comes here and makes believe that she came up to see you."

“Well, I’m sure she was very glad to see me, and so I was to see her,” said Mrs. William : “don’t take things to heart so, Grace ; after all, you see, here she is quite safe, and all’s well that ends well. Eve, you’re a naughty little puss, and I’ve a great mind not to take you to the play, as I promised, to-night. Come here, you monkey, and tell me all about Mr. Esmond, who he is and where you met him.”

“I cannot take your view of the matter, Louisa,” said Mrs. Pleydell, very gravely. “Eve has been guilty of grave duplicity and falsehood, and it will be long before I can trust her again. As to her going to the play, that is out of the question. She will go home with me by the 1.30, and I shall take very good care never to trust her or let her out of my sight again.”

“Don’t be cruel, Grace ; after all, all is fair in love, you know, and it was nothing but a girlish scrape, and no one is any wiser, so there is no harm done. Really she can’t go home to-day, she has a bad sore throat.”

“It is very bad indeed,” put in Eve.

“I cannot help it; a journey will not do it more harm than the theatre.”

“It is very hard,” said Eve, beginning to cry.

“I cannot think how you can be so unkind, Grace,” said Mrs. William. “What could be better for the child than staying with me?”

“It is you who have brought her up,” said Mrs. Pleydell; “it is with you she has learnt to disregard truth and honour. Forgive me, Louisa, but I am very miserable, and I think you must understand that I could not let her out of my sight again.”

Mrs. William Pleydell flushed angrily, but did not reply. Instead of that she turned to Eve.

“You have not told me about Mr. Esmond, Eve. Where did you meet him?”

“On the river.”

“Who introduced you?”

“He helped me once when my boat got stuck in the mud on the eyot. I was afraid

to say anything, because mummy is always so cross, and she would have kept me at home."

"It would have been a good thing if I had," said Mrs. Pleydell.

"But, Eve," pursued her aunt, "how was it you went to meet him after you heard he was married."

"He said he wasn't. I am engaged to him."

"But you know, Eve, this can't be. You can't be engaged to a man that no one belonging to you knows. What did he say to you yesterday?"

"I didn't see him," owned Eve, reluctantly. "He wrote and said he *must* see me, and I thought I could manage so beautifully coming up by the train that gets to Euston at one, and hearing what he had to say, and then going back by the same train as mummy and Iris, and looking as if I were at the station to meet them. But I waited and waited and he never came, and then of course the right train was

gone, and I knew there'd be no end of a fuss, so I came here instead. I wanted to see you, dear Aunt Louisa, and I'm sure I wish you'd keep me for ever."

"You need not hope for that," said Mrs. Pleydell, firmly.

"My throat is so bad I should like to go to bed," said Eve.

"So you shall, if you wish it, as soon as you go home. No, Eve, it is of no use," she continued, as the girl looked at her aunt; "you know when I say anything I mean it."

At this moment Tom Pleydell came in, looking very pale and agitated. He held a telegram in his hand, and both his aunt and step-mother exclaimed simultaneously,

"What is it, Tom? Whatever is the matter?"

He put the telegram into Mrs. Pleydell's hand.

"Help me to break it to her," he said, in a low voice.

But Mrs. William heard what he said, and,

rising, she came swiftly across the room, and saw the telegram before her sister-in-law could hide it.

“James Freeman, San Francisco, to Thomas Pleydell. Mr. William Pleydell died here yesterday of cholera. No effects. Break tidings to his wife. Further news by mail.”

Mrs. William did not what is called “give way.” She stood quite still a moment, and said softly, half to herself, “Poor fellow!” then shook hands with Mrs. Pleydell, saying, “Good-bye, Grace,” kissed Eve, and walked slowly from the room.

CHAPTER VIII.

Before the curing of a strong disease,
 Even in the instant of repair and health,
 The fit is strongest ; evils, that take leave,
 On their departure most of all show evil.

King John.—Act iii, Sc. 4.

FOR a moment Mrs. Pleydell and Tom looked at each other in silence, and then she exclaimed,

“Oh! Tom, I am sorry for you!”

“Yes,” he said, dreamily—“yes, I know you are. Ah! well, I hoped he would have lived to see things differently—to make restitution.”

“You did not know where he was?”

“No, I had no certainty. Of course I guessed he was in America, but I was particularly anxious not to know. Well,”—passing his hand over his eyes—“he is gone! Now all must rest with me.”

“Surely you do not think yourself liable?”

“Not legally, of course, but do you think I can ever know a moment’s real peace till all is paid and his name clear?”

“I understand your feeling. Of course there was so much that ought to have gone to the creditors.”

“Yes,” hastily, “do not let us speak of that. I cannot bear to think of it. My poor father! He was so good to me.”

“It was too bad of him to go away as he did, and spoil our season,” pouted Eve.

Tom started.

“Eve, I had forgotten. Dear, how you frightened us! How thankful we were to find you safe here!”

“Aunt Louisa wants me so much to stay,

but mummy won't let me," said Eve, plaintively.

"Quite right, dear Eve, you are far better at home," said Tom.

"Ah, it's all very well for you to say so," said Eve, piteously; "you're a man, and can do just whatever you please. You don't know how dreadful and dull and dismal it all is."

"You will soon get used to it and learn to think differently."

"It is time for us to be thinking of starting," said Mrs. Pleydell. "Tom, will you send a telegram for me to Aunt Rachel to ease her mind, and to say we shall be at Bannerton at 5.15. I wonder if I could be of any comfort to Louisa? Shall I go up and see?"

But at her sister-in-law's door she found herself denied admittance. Mrs. William thanked her without opening the door, and assured her she would rather be alone.

Tom escorted his aunt and cousin to the station, Eve complaining all the way of her throat. Mrs. Pleydell had so completely lost all confidence in her daughter, that she regarded it merely as a ruse assumed in the hope of being allowed to remain in London, but Tom thought the girl looking very ill, and before they reached Bannerton Mrs. Pleydell herself was convinced there really was something the matter, the girl seemed so dull and feverish.

Rapidly reviewing things in her mind, she decided that Iris should not come home with them, but should remain with her Aunt Rachel for a day or two. If Eve had only a feverish cold such a precaution could do no harm, while, if the child were really sickening with any infectious disorder, it would probably save Iris from catching it. So Iris was considerably surprised by being sent back again to her aunt, while Mrs. Pleydell stopped on her way through the town and begged that Dr. Jen-

kins would come to the Gate House, if possible, that evening.

On her arrival at home Eve went straight to bed, declaring she could not hold up her head,—of course mummy did not care, or she would never have dragged her away from Park Street when she was so ill. And now if she were to be very ill she must die with only a common country doctor to attend her.

When Dr. Jenkins arrived, rather late in the evening, he at once pronounced Eve to be in the first stage of scarlet fever, and congratulated Mrs. Pleydell on her prudence in having left Iris in Bannerton. He promised to send a nurse at once, and gave clear directions as to the best methods to be employed for preventing the spread of the infection.

Mrs. Pleydell listened attentively, made one or two suggestions which the doctor pronounced eminently practical, and arranged

with the maid who had been with them many years that her young subordinate should be sent off to Iris the first thing in the morning, taking with her as many of the girl's things as possible to get them out of the infected house. She then wrote notes to Iris and Miss Netherleigh, announcing the state of affairs, and pointing out that it would of course be impossible that the wedding should take place as had been arranged on the 30th, for that was only three weeks off, and it was impossible in so short a time that Eve should have recovered and the Gate House be again fit for habitation. Iris must therefore write and explain the matter to all who had been invited, as they would naturally rather hear from her than from the infected house.

Now that Eve was safe from the terrible peril that Mrs. Pleydell had feared for her, she could take a calmer view of Iris' conduct, and could see that though, as it happened, her concealment was ill-judged, yet she had every right to believe that Eve would keep

her promise as she herself would most certainly have done. In fact Iris had only been too confiding, and that in a girl could hardly be considered a crime. So Mrs. Pleydell ended her letter with the words :

“I know, dearest Iris, that, in my alarm yesterday, I spoke very harshly to you, but you can hardly realize what my terror was. Now that I consider calmly, which I could not do then, I acknowledge that, trusting, as you naturally thought yourself able to do, that Eve would keep her word, you were not so greatly to blame for keeping her secret; and I am quite sure your only motive was to save me pain.”

These notes Mrs. Pleydell confided to Dr. Jenkins, with a request that he would disinfect them properly, and deliver them at their destination, and, after his departure, set to work with the aid of the faithful Rogers, who had been with her ever since her first

marriage, to carry out his directions. For herself she had not the least fear of infection, but she neglected no precaution, not considering it right to leave anything to chance. It grieved her much that Iris's wedding must be postponed, but of course there was no help for it.

When Rogers was gone to bed, and she sat alone in the sick-room, she began to meditate gravely on the future of her eldest child. Iris appeared quite contented, but it seemed to her mother that Laurence wooed her in somewhat cavalier fashion. She had thought his shirking accompanying them to London strange in the extreme, and had wondered that Iris, who undoubtedly loved him dearly, had seemed to consider it quite a matter of course, and cheerfully accepted the position of being secondary to shooting. If he treated her so before marriage, what would he do when she was his wife?

But she had also been surprised to observe

how very seldom he wrote, and this, she fancied, had both astonished and hurt Iris, though, when her mother remarked upon it, she observed quickly that,

“Laurence had so much to do about the estate that he could not be expected to write much, and he knew that she was well, for she wrote every day.”

Mrs. Pleydell did not know it, but Laurence's letters were an astonishment and a shock to Iris. Like many other men, he prided himself on only writing “when he had something to say,” and never considered whether, even when inconvenient to himself, it might not give others pleasure to hear from him. He wrote letters so seldom that epistolary communication was most irksome to him, and Iris was surprised at the short, disjointed sentences, the ungrammatical observations, and perhaps more than all by frequent mistakes in spelling.

The first was a terrible shock to her. She

had taken Laurence entirely at his own valuation, had believed, as indeed he did most implicitly himself, that the only reason why he read so little was that he was always busy about his property, and had taken it for granted that he of course knew infinitely more on all subjects than she did.

Once or twice, when they had touched on some topic of public interest, and Iris, who had read a good deal on the subject, and was interested in it, had expressed an opinion, Laurence, who knew nothing whatsoever of the matter, except perhaps that the view she had taken was not in exact accordance with the strict shibboleth of his party, had put an end to any discussion in the off-hand and magnificent manner so dear to his sex, by observing that, "Women should never argue. They always got out of their depth, and showed their ignorance." And so great is the power of the mighty magician Love, that Iris really believed that Laurence must know better than she did, and looked for-

ward with delight to the time when he would be always at her side to instruct and guide her.

And to find this wise counsellor and teacher spelling disappointment with one *p*, and weather without the *a*, was a very terrible shock! Iris could hardly believe her eyes. It would be too much to say that it shook her faith in Laurence's pre-eminent wisdom; it was too firmly rooted to be readily disturbed, but it perplexed her beyond measure. Not for worlds would she have revealed the fact to her mother, she could see so well the arch which Mrs. Pleydell's eyebrows would take.

Though quite unaware of all this, Mrs. Pleydell was far from entertaining so exalted an idea of Laurence's attainments as her daughter did. To her he seemed singularly uninformed on even the simplest of the current topics of the day, and it was an ever increasing subject of surprise to her that he should have been able to charm Iris, who, in the opinion of her mother, was

intellectually so immeasurably his superior.

As she sat alone that night, Mrs. Pleydell found herself wondering whether this unavoidable postponement of the marriage would have any result—whether it would give Iris time to discover that Laurence was really ill-suited to her.

These musings only lasted during the earlier portion of the night; after that, Eve's condition occupied all her attention. The fever seemed to increase almost momentarily, the girl became delirious, and her mother listened in dismay to the affectionate epithets showered on "Claud, dearest Claud."

What a terrible hold this stranger seemed to have obtained over the child's affections! There was a great deal that Mrs. Pleydell could with difficulty make out, but she realised that it referred to the rumour of the said Claud being married, and Eve seemed very indignant with some one who was claiming him.

Until the delirium was over, Mrs. Pleydell quickly decided that the professional nurse might be in the house, but no one but herself and Rogers, on whose discretion she could depend, must approach Eve. She could not brook the idea of the poor child's heart-secret being laid bare before a stranger.

For the next three or four days Eve was in the greatest danger. The fever was extremely high, the delirium almost incessant, and in spite of all Dr. Jenkins could say, and the actual presence of the nurse in the next room, Mrs. Pleydell adhered to her intention, and divided the nursing with Rogers.

On the fifth day Dr. Jenkins allowed himself to speak some words of hope; on the seventh he pronounced the danger over, and, the delirium having passed away, Mrs. Pleydell consented to take the rest she so much required, and to allow the nurse to take charge of the patient.

When Mrs. Pleydell awoke, refreshed after

her sorely-needed sleep, she was able, after visiting Eve, and assuring herself that all was going on satisfactorily, to examine the correspondence, which she had not glanced at while the girl was in danger. Of course, there were innumerable letters of condolence on Eve's illness, and the postponement of the marriage, "always such a bad omen," one or two friends wrote, apparently oblivious that, even if that were their opinion, it was hardly a kind suggestion to make.

Lady Netherleigh wrote most kindly, urging that, as the wedding was put off, it would be an excellent time for Iris to pay them a visit. Of course, they would invite Mr. Furnivall as well, and should be glad of the opportunity thus afforded of making acquaintance with him.

There were notes from Miss Netherleigh and Iris, the former urging that it was very desirable that Iris should visit her father's people, and the latter saying that it was very kind of Lady Netherleigh, and, as it seemed that it

must be some time before she could rejoin her mother, she would like very much, now that Eve was pronounced out of danger, to go to Netherleigh for a little while. Laurence would be able to go the next week, and was very pleased to have been asked; she hoped her mother would not see any objection to her accepting the invitation.

Mrs. Pleydell was far from objecting—indeed, she felt very glad that Iris should stay at her father's old home, and make more intimate acquaintance with his family than had been possible in the bustle of their London visit. She wrote this to both Iris and Lady Netherleigh, and having burnt such of her correspondence as she had already answered, or which did not require a reply, she observed that there were two letters remaining of the pile that Rogers had placed ready for her, and that both were directed to Eve.

Under ordinary circumstances it would never have occurred to Mrs. Pleydell to open a letter addressed to her daughter, but she observed

that both those before her were addressed in a decidedly masculine hand, and considered herself amply justified, under all the circumstances, in opening them to gain what further enlightenment she could respecting Eve and Mr. Esmond. The first one she opened was as follows :

“ Parthenon Club, Pall Mall.

“ MY OWN DARLING,

“ Did you come to Euston as you suggested on Thursday in the hope of meeting me? I hope you did not, for I did not come to the Club till three, and, though I dashed off to Euston at once, you were nowhere to be seen. If you came up, what did you do? and what must you have thought of me? I was nearly wild with myself for being so late, and shall be here at ten every day to receive any letter you may write. Do let me have a line, sweet little Eve, to say you are not angry with me: And make some plan

about our meeting soon. I *must* see you, and explain everything, and will run down at any time and meet you anywhere you may appoint. I'm sorry it can't be at the old spot, but I hear the cottage is let to two old maids, so that is out of the question. You have kept our secret like a trump, you little pet, and I hope it needn't be one much longer. I have lots to say to you.

“With heaps of kisses, your own

“CLAUD.”

This had been written the day after Eve's journey to London, and had of course received no answer. Her correspondent had waited five days, and then wrote again.

“EVE, MY OWN DEAR LITTLE EVE,

“Surely you are not angry with me? My darling, don't you understand that, if I had got your letter, I should have been waiting for you? but that I didn't get it

till you, if you came (which, as things turned out, I devoutly hope you didn't), must have been half-way back to Bannerton. What more can I say, except that I'm awfully sorry, though, as you see, indeed it wasn't my fault. Do you think I would have failed to meet you if I had the chance? Forgive me, little Eve, and set your quick wits to work to settle how I can see you soon. Of course you don't believe a word of all the nonsense you were told, do you? I can explain everything, but I must kiss my Eve and hear her say she believes me first. Write, Eve. I cannot tell you how impatient I am growing.

“Ever your own

“CLAUD.”

Mrs. Pleydell mused over these letters for some time. What was her best course? Should she burn them and say nothing whatever about them, or should she allow Eve to see them when she recovered? After mature deliberation, she adopted neither alternative,

but decided to return them to Mr. Esmond with a few lines from herself. She wrote as follows :

“ SIR,

“ In returning you the enclosed letters addressed to my daughter, Miss Pleydell, I wish to inform you that I have become aware of the clandestine meetings which you, who are reported to be a married man, held with her on the river. I do not wish to remark on your conduct in thus compromising a vain and silly but innocent child, but merely to inform you that in future it will be impossible for you to approach her, and that any letter which you may address to her will be returned unopened. Even if you now approached her properly I should decline your acquaintance.

“ I have the honour to be, sir,

“ Your obedient servant,

“ GRACE PLEYDELL.”

This, with the letters enclosed, Mrs. Pleydell

directed to "Claud Esmond, Esq., Parthenon Club, Pall Mall," being in total ignorance of Mr. Urban's real name, and naturally not dreaming that he would never receive them. She hoped it would show him that his pursuit of Eve was of no avail, and that he would leave the girl alone in future.

When she returned to Eve's room, after writing the letters in her own, she found the girl awake.

"Are there no letters for me, mummy?" asked Eve, in a faint voice.

"No, my dear, none," said her mother.

Having determined that Eve should not see the letters, and having returned them, she considered this reply perfectly justifiable. Eve was not yet strong enough to be talked to seriously: when she was, it would be time enough, Mrs. Pleydell thought, to decide whether it would be judicious to tell her of them or not. At present the great point was to get her strong and well, and agitation would not be likely to assist this.

Very fragile she looked lying back on the pillows, all her wealth of golden hair gone, and one little thin hand straying among Mousse's curls. The little dog had never left her since she was taken ill, excepting when forcibly carried off by Rogers and shut out into the garden, where he whined in the most piteous manner at the door till re-admitted, and was too depressed to attempt to snap at his bitter enemy Fuss. The latter was also in a very disturbed state of mind; he missed Iris terribly, and whined and scratched at her door every night before stretching himself on the rug outside it.

Two or three days passed during which Eve made considerable progress, and then she again asked for letters, and on hearing that there were none, murmured to herself,

"It is very strange. I thought of course he would write."

Her mother affected not to hear. She did not yet think the girl strong enough for agitating

conversation, and felt sure that whenever the subject was broached between them she would excite herself.

“Have people sent to inquire about me?” asked Eve one day, when her recovery was so far advanced as to enable her to enjoy the feeling of importance consequent on being an invalid.

“Yes, everyone, I think, and the Beechmonts every day.”

“How tiresome it is to be shut up while they are here! Have they the house full still?”

“I don’t know at all. I have had other things to think about.”

“How soon shall I be able to see Hildegarde?”

“Not for another six weeks, certainly, and I daresay many people will be afraid of you even then.”

“How long have I been ill?”

“More than three weeks. To-day is the 4th of November.”

“Of November! Why, mummy, what became of the wedding?”

“It had to be put off, of course.”

“What a bore for Iris! Well, she deserves it, nasty cross thing, for telling of me when she promised not.”

“I don’t think it is for you to talk of broken promises, Eve. What did you promise Lord Rootley and Iris, and how did you keep your word.”

“Oh! but when people threaten things, and oblige you to promise, of course it doesn’t count.”

“Eve, were you serious the other day when you told your aunt that you never were introduced to Mr. Esmond, that you merely met him by chance on the river?”

“Yes, mummy. You see he helped me. The boat got fast in the eyot, and I should have been there all night if he hadn’t come in his boat and pulled me off, and then he was so handsome and so pleasant, and I met him again and——”

"You dispensed with ceremony and propriety."

Eve pouted.

"You're so cross, mummy. He's so nice and so handsome. I'm sure you'll like him."

"In all probability I shall never see him."

"Never see him! Why, I'm engaged to him!"

"You were told that he was already married."

"He says he can explain that. He said he must see me to tell me all, it was such a long story, and it was for that I went up to see him."

"And did not succeed."

"No," with a puzzled air. "I am sure he could not have got my letter, and yet I posted it myself too. If he had got it he would have written to say why he didn't come. Are you sure there are no letters for me, mummy?"

Now that her misdeeds were known, Eve thought the best plan was to brave the matter out, and assume that her engagement was satisfactory, and sure to be ratified. Nothing would have induced her to confess what qualms she had had as to whether she might trust to Claud's denial of his marriage, whether his story or that of the handsome, gipsy-looking woman were the true one.

Mrs. Pleydell reflected for a few moments, and then deciding that it would be wiser to tell Eve there had been a letter, and what had become of it, she said,

“My dear child, listen to me. It is nonsense for you to talk of being engaged to this Mr. Esmond. After his conduct in entangling a child like you in such an intrigue, I should decline his acquaintance, even if he now came forward honourably; he is not a man to whom I could intrust my child's happiness, even if he could prove that there was no foundation for the rumour of his marriage. He has written to

you to say that he did not meet you because he did not receive your letter in time, and I have returned his letters with a few lines saying that there was no use in his writing to you again, as you would not be permitted to receive his letters, that they would be returned unopened, and that in future he would not be allowed to approach you. I shall take very good care of that, Eve; you must not expect to be allowed the freedom you have hitherto enjoyed. You have abused confidence, and must suffer for it."

"You opened my letters!" exclaimed Eve.

"Yes," returned her mother, quietly: "and, for the future, I shall look over them before you receive them. I shall stop any that I see in Mr. Esmond's handwriting and return them to him."

"It is very hard," said Eve, piteously; then, as if a sudden thought had struck her, "how did you direct to him?"

"He signed merely 'Claud,' I directed to 'Claud Esmond, Esq., Parthenon Club.'"

Eve said nothing more, but seemed lost in thought, and her mother left her to her meditations.

CHAPTER IX.

His talk is like a stream which runs
 With rapid change from rocks to roses ;
 He slips from politics to puns,
 Passes from Mahomet to Moses ;
 Beginning with the laws that keep
 The planets in their radiant courses,
 And ending with some precept deep
 For dressing eels or shoeing horses.

The Vicar. PRAED.

LAURENCE had of course been a constant guest at Miss Netherleigh's house during Iris's stay there, and Aunt Rachel had watched him very closely, and was not particularly well satisfied with what she saw. She did not lay so great a stress as Mrs. Pleydell did on his want of interest in all intellectual subjects, though

she certainly wondered what it was in him that could have attracted such a girl as Iris; but she thought him more than ordinarily selfish, and more inclined even than men in general to think that, if a thing was agreeable to him, it must of course be delightful to everyone else.

Now Iris, her aunt thought, was by no means a girl to assimilate well with such a temperament; she was amiable indeed, and quite as inclined as the majority of her sex to sacrifice her own wishes and inclinations for the sake of those she loved, but she was exceptionally clear-headed and fond of justice, and, Miss Netherleigh feared, would be unlikely to be able to persuade herself that Laurence was invariably in the right. And if it ever came to a trial of will, to remonstrance on her part at being deprived of some perfectly legitimate enjoyment because it did not suit her husband's whim, it did not need any great gift of prophecy to tell who would be victorious.

The selfish are always those who carry their

point, and Laurence would have his way, while Iris would not complain, for she would consider that a dereliction of wifely duty, but would have a painful feeling of being unjustly dealt with, which would most certainly increase, and would in all probability produce estrangement.

The woman Laurence ought to marry was some one as selfish as himself, who would insist on having her own way quite as often as he had his, or else a timid little woman who would never discover that she was being treated unjustly and cavalierly.

She could not help smiling, although it often made her very angry to hear the short work that Laurence made of Iris's opinions whenever, by a rare chance, the conversation diverged from his descriptions of the sport he had had, or his anticipations of that which was to come. It was very clear to her observant eyes that he generally knew nothing whatever of the subject started, but he invariably said that women should not talk of what they could

not possibly understand: it was for men to do the thinking and arguing. Women ought to be very thankful to be spared the trouble. And if Iris at all rebelled at this doctrine, and insisted on a right to think of and be interested in what was going on in the world, he at once became peevish and "hoped to goodness she wasn't going to pretend to be strong-minded."

Miss Netherleigh observed that, in their talk about future plans, it was always his own pleasure he thought of, and not hers. When Iris suggested Italy for their honeymoon, and expressed the longing she had always had to see Rome, he demurred at once. What could she possibly want to go abroad for, among a lot of dirty foreigners who could only talk gibberish? Rome, too! There was nothing in the world to see there, except a few old walls and some dingy pictures; she could see plenty of them in the gallery at Rookwood.

Then, though he was willing enough to consult her as to any alterations she might like to

have made in the furniture or the gardens, it was very clear he never meant to give her her choice of ever going anywhere else—he meant to live at Rookwood entirely. To see what he would say, Aunt Rachel asked if he thought of buying a house in London, or only of taking one when they went up for the season, and, without any reference to Iris, he replied that they should do neither,—he did not like London.

“Iris may, though,” observed Miss Netherleigh, “and it certainly would be better for you both not to vegetate the whole year round.”

“I don’t know what you call vegetating,” he said, with rather a sulky look. “I can’t see what anyone can want better than Rookwood. There’s fishing, and shooting, and hunting; something for every season of the year, without wanting to go and be bored to death in London.”

Mrs. Furnivall called once or twice, and treated Iris with the most freezing courtesy,

but it was clear to Miss Netherleigh that she disliked the marriage excessively, and this raised the old lady's vehement wrath, though she more than half suspected that it was the mere fact of her son marrying at all, and not the object of his choice that Mrs. Furnivall disliked.

Laurence did not make his appearance every day. Cub-hunting had now commenced, and there was shooting also to be attended to, but he came every unoccupied day, and sometimes in the evening, and Iris appeared quite satisfied, which surprised her aunt.

"I should not have been at her age," she mused. "Ah, poor Walter! He never tried me! He was never absent from my side when he could help it." For Aunt Rachel had once, like Iris, been on the brink of marriage. Her lover, Sir Walter Avington, had been killed out hunting, and she had, in spite of all other eligible offers, remained all her life faithful to his memory.

“What day shall you come, Laurence?” asked Iris, the day before her departure for Netherleigh, as they walked backwards and forwards in Miss Netherleigh’s garden.

It was the last week in October, and, though it was fairly warm and balmy, the smell of decay so characteristic of autumn was in the air. The paths, though scrupulously swept every morning, were thick with fallen leaves, the odour of which mingled with the fragrance of the still remaining clematis and heliotrope. The glory of the borders had departed, but hollyhocks and dahlias still gave a little colour, and here and there a few clumps of sweet peas yet looked fairly gay.

Iris liked the thought of this visit to Netherleigh, and yet she was not quite happy at going without having seen her mother. Although Mrs. Pleydell had written her forgiveness, and had acknowledged that, in the extremity of her alarm, she had spoken with undue harshness, Iris knew she should not feel as if all were right between them until

she had felt her mother's arms round her neck, and her lips upon her cheek.

Besides, she was very uneasy as to the effect of all the anxiety and nursing upon her, and would fain have seen with her own eyes that she was as well as she reported herself to be. But of course it was not to be thought of, and she was obliged to satisfy herself with Mrs. Pleydell's notes, and the reports of Dr. Jenkins.

It was a disappointment to her that Laurence was not to escort her on her journey. It had at first been arranged that he should do so, but, on the very day she was to start, the Master of the Hounds proposed to go to Rookwood for cub-hunting, and Laurence at once announced the absolute necessity of his being at home. Then there was an invitation for a shooting-party the ensuing day at Driffelsmere, Sir William Turton's place, on the other side of the county, and that was too pleasant an offer to be refused.

Miss Netherleigh felt very indignant at the cool way in which he resigned Iris's company in favour of sport, but the girl herself seemed quite contented, and to think it all right, so she held her peace.

The truth was that Iris realized that, owing to her having never known father, brother, or other near male relative, she was likely to be but ill-instructed in the ways and peculiarities of men, and was always afraid of being foolishly *exigeante* and troublesome, and of not entering into all the importance and necessity of the sport of which she had of course been brought up in ignorance.

It did sometimes strike her as very strange that Laurence, who had been shooting and hunting ever since he could either hold a gun or mount a pony, should find it more interesting to recapitulate all the events of a *battue*, or to argue as to the probable wood in which some wretched fox had

succeeded in escaping his pursuers, than to talk on any of the stirring topics of the day. She was yet far from realizing that the latter were not of the very slightest interest to him, and that he could not talk of them for the excellent reason that he knew nothing.

“Well,” replied Laurence, “as I can’t come with you to-morrow, I think I had better say Friday—that will give me one day more with the hounds on Thursday.”

“You are going to bring your horses to Netherleigh, are you not?”

“Yes; Sir Charles has asked me to bring a couple, but I am not sure if they will suit the country. However, I shall like to see the Moorshire; they are a good pack.”

“I wish you were coming with me,” said Iris.

“So do I, but it wasn’t possible. You might have waited till Friday.”

“Lady Netherleigh wanted me at once, be-

cause Uncle Frederick and his wife leave on Thursday, and she wants me to make acquaintance with as many of the family as possible."

"Well, you'll get there all right."

"Oh, of course; I am not at all afraid of the journey."

"I say, Iris, when do you think Eve'll be out of quarantine? It's awful hard lines having our wedding put off; do you remember it was to have been on Thursday? When do you think it can be?"

"I don't know, I am sure; I couldn't tease mamma about it yet. I believe Eve will not be safe for another six weeks—at least, so Dr. Jenkins says, and when she is they will have to go away for a little for change of air, and to get the house thoroughly disinfected."

"Six weeks will bring it to the middle of December, and I don't suppose they'll disinfect the house under a month—workmen always are such dawdles—that makes it the

middle of January; it's an awfully long time, Iris."

"Indeed it is, Laurence, but it is a thing you know that no one could help."

"I don't see why we shouldn't be married quite quietly now at Netherleigh. I don't suppose Sir Charles would mind it, and it would be a great blessing to get out of all the fuss and bother of a grand wedding. What do you think?"

"It is quite impossible—mamma couldn't come," said Iris.

She was a little hurt at his wish to escape all pomp and ceremony. No woman, no matter how little wedded to the vanities of the world, in her heart likes the thought of a quiet wedding. It is the one great epoch of her life, the one which, in a great many instances, she has been trained to look forward to from her very cradle, and she likes it to be marked by all possible splendour. The aversion of the male creature to the proceeding is incomprehensible to her, and she is inclined to resent it as an

indication that he is not very anxious to exhibit the treasure he has won to the whole world.

Iris in a degree felt all this, but still the reason she had given was the one foremost in her mind. Be married without her mother's presence! Impossible! She would rather, far rather, wait a year. What could Laurence be thinking of even to suggest such a thing?

"She would know it was all right."

"Laurence!" said Iris, stopping and looking at him with the tears in her eyes—"I can't think how you can suggest anything so dreadful. Please don't mention it again."

"Well, I don't see what there is to upset you; but of course it must be as you please. But it's very hard having to wait for you, Iris, and you oughtn't to be angry with me for saying so."

"I'm not angry, Laurence dear, only—it hurt me so your thinking I could bear it without mamma."

“How long shall you be at Netherleigh?”

“Lady Netherleigh won’t hear of my staying less than a month. She says they expect that of course you will stay all the time.”

“They’re very kind, but I’m afraid two horses would hardly do a whole month with the Moorshire. Perhaps there’s some place near where I could send a couple more.”

It was a little after four on the 28th of October that Iris and her maid drove up to Netherleigh. It was a fine old Elizabethan mansion of red brick, much festooned with ivy. It stood on the side of a hill, and from the house were terraces planted with fine cypresses, the balustrades being relieved by large vases, in which the scarlet geraniums still showed a few blossoms; at the bottom of the terraces was a small lake, on the other side of which lay the park, finely timbered with oak and beech, beneath which herds of deer moved through the brown and golden bracken. Behind the house

the hill, covered with fine woods, rose somewhat abruptly, sheltering it from the north and east.

Lady Netherleigh met Iris in the hall and took her up at once to the charming little room, close to her own boudoir, which was prepared for her.

"I am so glad to have you," she said; "though of course we are sorry for the cause. So sad for you too, dear, to have your wedding put off! How does Mr. Furnivall bear it? It is very hard upon him."

"There is nothing to do but to make the best of it."

"Well, of course, that is the right way to look at it. Now, if you are ready, we will go down; we always have tea in the hall, and it is nearly time. I think there are some people you will like. There are Fred and his wife: she is the cleverest woman you ever saw with her hands, can do any kind of work, or carving, or modelling more beautifully than anyone else, but does not talk a great deal. Mr. Thornham

is an artist ; he has been the last three years in Italy, and his portfolios are a real treat. Mr. Vavasour and his wife are very musical, she sings exquisitely, and also accompanies his violin to perfection ; then there is Mr. Haywood, whose charming novels you have read, of course, and Mr. Leston, the essayist, besides several couples and young men and maidens, distinguished for nothing, but necessary as an audience."

"It sounds delightful," said Iris ; "how I shall enjoy seeing and watching so many clever people !"

"Though they are lions," said Lady Netherleigh, laughing, "they 'roar you as gently as any sucking dove.' Come along and you shall see."

There certainly did not seem anything very remarkable in any of the people to whom Iris was introduced at tea-time ; but during the evening it began to strike her that the conversation had a decidedly higher tone than what she was accustomed to hear. Subjects in which

she took considerable interest, and which hitherto she had never discussed with anyone but Lady Imogene or Lord Rootley, were brought forward, and she delighted in listening to calm and wise arguments upon them.

The next two days were very pleasant. Iris found herself able to talk to the one person she had dreaded as being so far too clever to care to talk to her, Mr. Leston, the essayist. He proved not to be in the slightest degree formidable—really clever people very seldom are—and seemed to take a pleasure in talking to her, and recommending her books. He observed to Lady Netherleigh that he had seldom met a girl with such a candid mind, and she repeated this to Iris, who felt it to be a great compliment.

“I suppose Mr. Furnivall will come by the same train you did?” said Lady Netherleigh to her niece on the Friday morning. “I was going to propose that we should fetch him from the station; but two or three people whom I

did not expect till to-morrow have written to offer themselves to-day, being obliged to leave Cotherstone Towers owing to illness in the house. I must telegraph to them. I think that train will bring everyone except Mr. Winchester; the dog-cart must go for him later."

"Do you mean the poet?" exclaimed Iris.

"Yes. Are you one of his great admirers?"

"Oh, yes! I think 'Lilian's Story' one of the most beautiful things I ever read."

"If you did not belong of right to Mr. Furnivall I would send you in to dinner with him. Well, you will have plenty of opportunity of talking to him, on hunting or shooting days; he is to stay a fortnight."

Of course the greeting between the lovers could not be very fervent, as it took place before the eyes of the assembled company in the hall; but both contrived to be early before dinner, and to secure a few minutes alone.

"You are looking very well," said Laurence, when he had enjoyed the loverlike salutation impossible on his arrival; "how are you enjoying yourself here? What sort of people are there in the house?"

"It is delightful," exclaimed Iris, enthusiastically, and she proceeded to give him a description of all the people in the house, ending with a delighted observation; "and, *do you know*, Mr. Winchester came before dinner!"

"Winchester! the great shot! Ah, that'll be some one worth meeting."

"I don't know, I don't think he shoots," said Iris, rather puzzled; "indeed I am sure from what Lady Netherleigh said that he doesn't. He is the great poet."

"Poet?—is that all? Do you know where and when the hounds meet?"

"There is to be a lawn meet here on Monday."

"That's satisfactory. I can just go out before, and see what sort of a country it is. Are there any hunting men here?"

“Really I don’t know. I haven’t heard anything about it. Everyone has been talking of such interesting things. Oh! and, Laurence, you must look over Mr. Thornham’s portfolios of Roman sketches. I am sure, when you have seen them, you will never rest till you have been there.”

“When I have seen the picture of a place it is all the same as having seen it. It’ll be much less trouble to look at the sketches than to go to Rome. But I don’t expect they’ll be at all in my line. A good country and a game fox is more in my way.”

Here some of the rest of the party entered, and the *tête-à-tête* was over.

Laurence entertained Iris during dinner with a minute account of his two days’ hunting since she left, and a circumstantial narrative of the day’s shooting at Driffelsmere, of the compliments that had been paid to his shooting, and the fact that he had shot three out of the four woodcocks. Iris listened attentively, and responded when necessary. She was glad to

have Laurence once more at her side, happy that he had had three days of such evident enjoyment, pleased that he should enjoy himself by telling her all about it.

But nevertheless, when stray sentences from some of the other members of the party caught her ear, she could not help thinking how very much more interesting their several topics of conversation were, and almost wishing that Laurence would end his very lengthy description of the death of the last cub the day before, and let her hear the evidently interesting story that Mr. Haywood was telling about some experience of his in Athens.

When at length the cub had been satisfactorily slain, she turned to listen, and observed,

“Does not Mr. Haywood tell a story well?”

“Oh, I don’t know; I suppose so. He writes novels, didn’t you say? Of course it comes easy to him to make up a story as he goes on; but I don’t think it’s amusing.”

"But this was something that really happened to him."

"You never can tell what's true or not when people have been abroad; it's a proverb, you know, that travellers tell strange tales."

The evening did not prove amusing to Laurence. He sat by Iris and talked to her, but the general tone of the conversation bored him, and he did not care for the music, which was very good, and for which Lady Netherleigh insisted on silence. Neither did he like Iris's being drawn into a discussion of the merits of Doré's illustrations of Dante, in which Mr. Thornham and Mr. Winchester took eager part. Of course he was quite out of it. He barely knew either Dante or Doré by name, and certainly had not the very faintest idea of anything about the spirit of either the poem or the illustrations.

It could not be said that he was what could be called jealous, but he felt aggrieved that Iris should be so interested in a subject for

which he did not care. She was much more animated than when he had been telling her about the hunting, which surely was more interesting than all this trash.

And during his whole visit he was little better pleased. Iris devoted herself to him whenever he was not hunting or shooting; he could not doubt of her love for him, or even dream of accusing her of flirting with or encouraging anyone else, but he had an uncomfortable, uneasy feeling that she was sought more than he was. It was, in fact, just like his former experience in London; he was not the first, as he was accustomed to be, and he did not like it.

He made up his mind that after his marriage he would not often stay at Netherleigh. The sport was good; even he was obliged to allow that he had seldom had better covert shooting, and that the Moorshire had more brilliant runs than often fell to the lot of the Coalshire, but the evenings he voted dull. He did not think Lady Netherleigh had a good stamp of men

about her ; what did she want with artists and poets and novel-writers ?

Mr. Thornham had incurred his deadly displeasure, because he had heard him, when Iris was looking over his portfolio, tell her that, with her love of art, it was a thousand pities she should not go to Rome. And Iris, instead of saying at once that it was impossible, as she knew it was, actually said how much she should enjoy it, and even said something about perhaps it might be managed next winter.

Next winter ! Why, she knew that then he would be Master of the Hounds ! He had told her only two days before that Mr. Fulmer was positively going to give them up at the end of the present season, and that he had promised to take them. She could hardly have forgotten so important a piece of news, and yet she coolly talked of Rome !

He said something of this to her when they were next alone.

“Dear me!” said she, with a start; “I’m afraid I quite forgot all about the hounds. But surely, Laurence, they will not always keep you at home? That would be a terrible tie.”

“I want nothing better than to be tied at home. I like being there better than anywhere else.”

“Surely you like being here? it is so very pleasant.”

“I don’t see anything so very delightful. The sport is good enough, but no one cares to talk it over afterwards, which is half the pleasure. Sir Charles rides forward enough and seems to enjoy it, but he never mentions it after dinner: then it is all the turn of these painting and writing fellows.”

“I am sorry you do not enjoy yourself,” said Iris, gently, “but you can always talk to me of what you have been doing.”

“Yes, but you haven’t seen it, and can’t understand. Besides, you don’t care—you like

much better listening to all the nonsense these fellows jabber."

"Indeed, Laurence, it isn't nonsense."

"Well, I think it is, and of course a man must know better what is sense and what isn't than a woman. I am going home on Friday."

"Oh, Laurence, must you? Why? I am so sorry!" and the tears rose in her eyes.

The sight of them somewhat mollified him.

"I wouldn't go if I could help it," he said, kissing her: "I'd stay here till you went back, dull as I think it, but my mother makes a favour of it. She's got some people coming to stay, and wants me to help her——"

"Well, I'm very sorry, but I suppose you can't help it," said Iris.

And for the remaining two evenings of his stay she devoted herself so entirely to listening

to the accounts of his day's sport, that he found Netherleigh less dull than he had done for the previous three weeks.

CHAPTER X.

She's outwardly
 All that bewitches sense, all that entices ;
 Nor is it in our virtue to uncharm it.

BEAUMONT.

VERY soon after Laurence's return home, it struck him that he might as well call at Beechmont. He was not, as he himself described it, "good at calling," still that shooting exchange with Lord Beechmont had been most convenient, he had enjoyed a good deal of their hospitality, and—he had an afternoon with nothing particular to do.

So he walked over, found the ladies at home, and confirmed his original impression

that Lady Hildegarde was "very fast and awfully bad form." Perhaps this might not have struck him so forcibly if she had not snubbed him most decidedly, and clearly shown her preference for the conversation of Captain Deverell, who happened to be paying a visit at the same time.

Laurence was not used to being snubbed, all his experience in Coalshire had lain in diametrically the opposite direction, and even the novelty of the proceeding failed to render it agreeable. And to be neglected for Captain Deverell was specially annoying. How could that handsome young soldier—though Laurence naturally considered him by no means good-looking,—dare to enter into competition with a Furnivall of Rookwood, one of the oldest families and finest places in the county.

It of course never struck Laurence that Captain Deverell might be one of the oldest families in another county; Coalshire and his

own position in it were far too much in the foreground of his mind for him to give a thought to such a contingency. As he personally knew nothing of his family, he airily characterised him as "a mere nobody," and wondered that Lady Beechmont should allow "a conceited puppy without sixpence" to hang about her daughter.

Presently Mr. Morton, the Rector of Elmhurst, was announced, and though Laurence knew him well, and therefore recognized him as a person privileged by his position to visit at Beechmont, he found it rather dull when the new-comer monopolized Lady Imogene, and he was left to amuse himself as best he might with Lady Beechmont. That lady could be amusing enough when it suited her, but she had never particularly liked Laurence, who would have been aghast to hear that she considered him "a good-looking country bumpkin with nothing to talk about."

She was also not in a specially good humour,

for by some accident they had been two days without guests, and would be alone until the next day. She had, therefore, fallen back upon her usual resource of ill-health, and discoursed eloquently to Laurence on her nerves and other maladies.

It was in anything but an amiable humour that Laurence left Beechmont: it was not with such indifference that his extremely rare calls were wont to be received in the neighbourhood. He had not long left the grounds and passed the Gate House when he encountered Eve in a Bath-chair drawn by the gardener, and escorted by the worthy but somewhat grim Rogers.

Laurence had a great contempt for those who feared infection, and was wont to talk in a lofty and curiously illogical manner on the subject. Besides, he had himself once had scarlet fever, so he had not the slightest scruple about stopping to talk to Eve. She on her part was overjoyed: it was seven weeks since she had spoken to anyone, except her

mother and the doctor. Mousse, who lay curled up in her lap, snarled vehemently as Laurence shook hands.

"Well, Eve, I wish you joy of being out again."

"Yes, it is only my second day. But why aren't you afraid of me? Everyone else flies off to the other side of the road."

"I'm not such an idiot; there is no such thing in my opinion as infection."

"I wish other people thought so. Oh, Laurence, it is so dull!"

"You poor little thing! I daresay it is. And you don't look as if you were getting on very fast."

For Eve looked very white and fragile, though excessively pretty, prettier indeed, Laurence thought, than he had ever seen her. There was a tenderness and beauty in her large, brown eyes that he had never seen before.

"No," said Eve; "that is what Doctor Jenkins says, only he uses some fine word—

recuperate, I think it is. We are going away to the sea as soon as he thinks me strong enough to move, and, meanwhile, I have to go out in this horrid thing."

"I should have thought the pony-carriage would have been pleasanter."

"Of course it would, but mummy is knocked up and obliged to be quiet for a while, with nursing me, you know. I'm so awfully sorry," and Eve looked up in the most touching way: "she can't go out, and she won't let me go without her."

"Do you think she would let me drive you?" said Laurence, feeling a great compassion for the little girl shut up in what seemed to him so doleful a conveyance as a Bath-chair.

"Oh! Laurence, but would you? Oh! I do believe I should get strong directly if I could go quickly against the air. It is so dull to go crawling along in this horrid thing, and it would be so nice to have you to talk to."

"Well, but will Mrs. Pleydell let you?"

"Come and ask her. I suppose she won't let

you come into the house, but you might go round to the drawing-room window. Was Netherleigh very pleasant? Oh! I did envy Iris being there all the time that I have been shut up. I must say she wrote everything she could think of to amuse me. It seems to be a gay house."

"There was capital shooting, and we had some good runs. I don't know that the people were particularly pleasant. Lady Netherleigh seems to get together poets, and painters, and novelists, and all that kind of people."

"Iris must have enjoyed herself. She has always longed to meet people of that sort."

"Well, I don't care for them."

"I'm sure I shouldn't. I shouldn't understand what they were talking about, but then Iris goes in for being clever, and intellectual, and all that. I'd rather listen to you talking about horses and hounds."

Laurence wondered very much that he had never liked Eve before. It could not be only

her illness that had made her so winning. He supposed it was because he had hitherto had all his thoughts set upon Iris, that he really had not observed her sister's fascination.

"If you please, sir," here observed Rogers, "it is getting late, and Dr. Jenkins was most particular Miss Pleydell was not to be out after sunset."

"Will you come and ask mummy now?" said Eve, wistfully.

Laurence had almost forgotten his offer, and thought, with a momentary pang, that he had "let himself in" for what would interfere disastrously both with hunting and shooting, but he was sorry for Eve, and the expression of her eyes was so piteous that he could not find it in his heart to disappoint her; so he turned and walked by her side to the Gate House.

He was demonstratively greeted by Fuss, who evidently recognized him as a friend of his absent mistress. The poor little fellow had

been inconsolable ever since Iris's departure ; so completely were his spirits gone that he allowed Mousse to tyrannize over him in the most flagrant manner, and the Maltese, who was at first astonished at the change, now considered that he was paramount of right. Fuss's greeting gave Eve time to enter the drawing-room and warn her mother of Laurence's approach, and she opened the window and greeted him. He exclaimed in dismay at her looking so ill.

"It is nothing serious," she said, quietly, "only fatigue and anxiety. Don't write anything alarming to Iris—promise me you will not."

"No, if you don't wish it."

"There is nothing really the matter, and I don't want to spoil her enjoyment. What a delightful visit she is having ; she writes in ecstasies at enjoying the society of so many clever people. It is a treat such as she has never had before. It is a pity you were obliged to come away."

“My mother wanted me to entertain some friends.”

“Yes, so Iris said. Of course it was quite right and proper you should come, but naturally she was sorry. Do you go back again?”

“No, I think not. They were very kind in asking me, but I hardly think I can manage it.”

“You are the first person of the outer world we have seen. You are courageous!”

“Oh! I should never think of such nonsense. Mrs. Pleydell, Eve seems very dull in her Bath-chair, will you let me drive her in the pony-carriage? It will do her good.”

“It is really kind of you,” said Mrs. Pleydell, warmly.

She was surprised. It did not enter into her conception of Laurence's character that he would be very earnest in giving himself trouble for others; besides, she had always believed that he did not like Eve.

“Shall I come to-morrow about eleven? That is the finest and warmest part of the day.”

“Thank you, I shall be very glad. I hope in a few days I shall be able to turn charioteer myself, but Dr. Jenkins makes a great point of my keeping perfectly quiet. But, Laurence,”—and she hesitated—“I suppose Iris has told you. I know you told her what you saw. Of course you know about Eve’s going up to London?”

“Yes, Iris told me.”

“When she got better I talked to her; but she did not seem either sorry or ashamed. I cannot make out whether she knows for certain that this Mr. Esmond is not married; at any rate she will give no promise of not communicating with him, and indeed if she did I could not trust her, for she broke her word, as you know. I dare not let her go out in the carriage alone, for fear of her posting a letter, or in some manner contriving a clandestine meeting.”

"I see. Well, of course she will be quite safe with me."

"Yes, I know that, and I shall be sincerely grateful to you. You don't know anything of this Mr. Esmond, do you, Laurence?"

"No, nothing whatsoever. I don't even know him by sight."

"I thought, of course, that he was an old London acquaintance, but her aunt knew nothing of him. It is very shocking, but I believe she really picked him up on the river."

"Don't distress yourself too much. She will soon forget him and be all right."

"I wish I could think so! Well, Laurence, I must not keep you. It is getting quite late. Thank you very much for your offer. Eve shall be quite ready for you."

It was rather a bold assertion to make that Eve should be ready for anything, for one of her most aggravating peculiarities was her habitual disregard of time. Mrs. William Pleydell was not exact as to time herself,

and had allowed her niece to acquire habits of unpunctuality, very pleasant to her self-indulgent nature, but unspeakably provoking to sensible people.

Mrs. Pleydell had struggled ever since Eve returned to endue her with some sense of time, but, though the girl always promised amendment, it never became apparent. Still, as Iris had often privately observed, Eve was generally ready in excellent time when any pleasure of her own might have been jeopardised by delay, and perhaps she thought Laurence might not be very patient if kept waiting, for she was quite ready when he arrived, and soon, carefully wrapped up, was established in the pony-carriage by his side.

He had encountered considerable opposition at home when he had announced that he was going to drive Eve instead of meeting the hounds, as he had intended, at Aylmer's Gorse. Mrs. Furnivall exclaimed vehemently at his imprudence in approaching anyone so recently recovered from scarlet fever; and

when he reminded her that he had had the malady only six years before, and was therefore presumably exempt, she rejoined that he seemed to forget that, even if he did not catch the fever himself, he might bring home the infection to others.

Whereupon Laurence propounded his pet theory of the non-existence of infection, and his mother told him he was talking egregious nonsense about things he did not in the least understand. It would really serve him quite right if he caught the fever again, and postponed his marriage for still longer than had been already the case.

It was not often that Mrs. Furnivall allowed her son to think that she believed him to be otherwise than perfect; indeed, until he had chosen to engage himself to Iris, she had perhaps never done so, and his serene belief in his own perfections was, in a great measure, owing to her. But she could not brook the thought of her coming deposition from

the proud position of mistress of Rookwood, still less that she must resign in favour of a girl against whom she had specially warned her son, and who, as she chose to think, was "so utterly unsuited to him" on other grounds besides her "objectionable connections."

Mrs. Furnivall would not have credited, even if she had been told, that Mrs. Pleydell and Miss Netherleigh were both troubled with considerable misgivings as to whether Iris were not unsuited to Laurence, not, as his mother believed, from not being good enough for him, but from being far too clever to be happy with anyone so far, intellectually, her inferior. But any reference to the marriage irritated her, and the thought that her son might be met driving Eve Pleydell, "the niece of a defrauding bankrupt and common cheat," filled her with wrath.

However, in telling Laurence he was talk-

ing nonsense she had wounded his vanity, and overshot her mark. He merely looked at her as if wondering if she had taken leave of her senses, put his hands in his pockets, and walked whistling out of the room.

It was a very fine day in the first week of December. There had been a hoar frost in the morning, but it had yielded to the bright sun, excepting in the shade of the hedges, where the grass was still white with rime; it was perfectly still and calm, the sky deep blue, and almost without a cloud; it was an ideal day for Eve's first drive.

Wonderfully pretty Laurence thought her as she leaned back, wrapped up in her furs, and looked up at him with great, velvety-brown eyes. They were not so beautiful as Iris's, which were a deep grey, but why should he compare the two? The fact that Iris was beautiful did not prevent Eve from being quite bewitchingly pretty. It was

very strange he had never admired her before.

He was infinitely more astonished to find how very pleasant the girl made herself. Hitherto she had always seemed to laugh at him, and Laurence was excessively sensitive about ridicule; he thought too much of his own dignity and importance, and mixed too little in general society not to be so. But now Eve was soft and gentle, deferring to his opinion, and showing an interest in his sports that made her an eminently pleasant companion.

“And did you really give up your day’s hunting to drive me?” she said, wonderingly looking up at him. “Oh! Laurence, how good of you! But I am sorry. I could have waited till to-morrow.”

“I will come and drive you again to-morrow, Eve.”

“Oh, how nice! But are you sure, Laurence, that you haven’t got something else you want to do? There is no hunting; but don’t you want to shoot, or isn’t there

some business? I know you always have so much on your hands, and I don't want to be in the way."

What a reasonable little thing she was! It struck him that Iris never seemed to understand that hunting and shooting were things which took precedence of everything else. She acknowledged it if it was put before her, but she never seemed thoroughly to realise or remember it.

"You won't be in the way at all. I am very glad to be of use to you."

"It *is* a relief to get away from the Bath-chair, but, above all, from Rogers," sighed Eve; "she is such a grim creature, and somehow she always makes me think of a bat, a creature I detest."

"A bat! You very fanciful child!"

"Well, don't you know the funny way she holds out her arms, and the large sleeves drop from them—I declare she is just like one. And she is as solemn as an owl."

"She doesn't look lively, I allow. But I thought Iris was so fond of her."

"Yes, I believe so. But then she is fond of Iris—she was her nurse, you know—and hates me."

"Nonsense, child! As if anybody could hate you."

"Ah, you don't know," said Eve, looking up pathetically. "Mummy doesn't like me at all, do what I will I never can please her, and, though Iris is very kind and all that, she is not a bit fond of me. You see she and mummy are everything to each other, and I'm just an inter-loper."

"You should not say that, Eve. I am sure they are very fond of you."

"I suppose it doesn't sound well to say it, but it is true all the same. And talking to you about it is not like anyone else; you are so kind, and you are almost a relation."

"But I don't like to hear you talk so, Eve. I am sure it is your fancy."

She shook her head ; she felt sure he saw the tears in her eyes.

“I should not ‘fancy’ anything so unpleasant, you may be sure ; indeed, it is true enough. How I wish mummy would let me go back to Aunt Louisa, who is so fond of me ! We should be so happy, and she would be rid of me.”

“But that is the very last thing she wants to be.”

“Ah !” with a deep sigh ; then, shyly, “but surely you must know quite well from Iris that they don’t want me at home.”

“I know nothing of the sort, Iris never said anything of the kind. She was very much upset once when I told her——” and he stopped. He had not intended to touch on the delicate ground of Mr. Esmond.

“You mean about Mr. Esmond,” said Eve, with a faint blush ; “I knew you had told her. I don’t feel angry with you, dear Laurence, I suppose it was the right thing for you to do, and you couldn’t help yourself. I’m sure you’d

never do anything unkind. And I don't want to blame Iris, but I can't help thinking it was unkind of her to break her word and tell mummy."

"But, Eve—I thought—that is, I understood—surely you had promised not to communicate with him, and it was on the faith of that that she promised silence?"

"It is *partly* true," said Eve. "I did promise, and I kept my word till I got a despairing letter. He knew I had heard he was married, and he wanted to tell me how untrue it was, and to explain how the story had arisen. It was a long history, he said, and he must see me to tell it properly; where could he meet me? Iris was away; I could not tell her the strait in which I was, and I wrote to say I would meet him at Euston. I quite meant to come back by mummy's train, and it would have been all right. But my train was late, and he did not meet me, and I missed the down train, and then I went to Aunt Louisa. And, as soon as I was missed, Iris went up to

my room and searched my blotting-book, and though there was nothing to tell her that the note of which she found the impression was to Mr. Esmond, for there was no address, and not even a beginning, she ran down and told mummy and old Miss Netherleigh everything. I think it was rather hard."

"I am sure her last thought was to harm you; but you must remember how dreadfully alarmed they were."

"Oh! I don't bear malice," said Eve, with her sweetest smile; "I'm sure Iris is always right, and she is so clever and superior, and all that, but it was rather hard upon me. Mummy scolded me awfully as soon as I began to get a little better, and she opened two of Mr. Esmond's letters and sent them back without my even seeing them."

"Eve, are you very sure all *is* right about him? Because, you know, certainly it was believed here that he was married."

"I believe him," said Eve, with touching

simplicity. "However, it is all over now. Mummy said that, even if he came to her now and asked for me openly, she should refuse, because he had met me clandestinely."

"And are you willing that it should be what you call 'all over'?"

"I must make up my mind to it. Mummy never changes her mind. I wish she would let me write to him just once to tell him that it is all over, and that I was not allowed even to see his letters. Do you think you could persuade her?"

"I am afraid not. I am sure she would refuse."

"Has she said anything to you?" asked Eve, quickly; then, as he coloured and looked embarrassed, she continued, "Ah! I was sure she would. I assure you I am watched morning, noon, and night, for fear I should post a letter."

"Well, you are going away soon, and by the

time you come back you will have forgotten."

"That is so easy to say," said Eve, with a tearful smile; "but we have talked quite enough about me. I don't want to bore you, and I am sure you and Iris must hate me enough already for being the cause of putting off your marriage."

"Well, you couldn't help it."

"No, I did not have scarlet fever for fun, certainly. Well, I am glad Iris has had this pleasant visit. How she has enjoyed all the clever people; there was a letter this morning full of them. Now that wouldn't amuse me a bit; but then I'm stupid, and I'm afraid I shall always be so, for all the wise, dull books that mummy makes me read."

"When are you going away?"

"Next week, if mummy is well enough, and we stay three weeks, and then when we come back I suppose you'll be married at once. Laurence, don't be shocked, but shan't you be awfully sorry to miss the January and February hunting?"

Laurence felt a pang at the suggestion, but he of course could not allow its truth, though, had he only known it, his countenance was most eloquent, so much so that Eve nearly laughed.

"I shall have sufficient compensation for the loss, you know," he said.

"Yes, of course. And have you settled where you are going for the honeymoon? Iris has always longed for Rome, and ever since she has met this artist at Netherleigh she has quite raved."

"Rome is a good way off," said Laurence, gloomily.

He was but ill-pleased to hear that Iris had recurred to the idea of Rome, which he had so decidedly negatived. It really seemed as if she ignored his wishes and preferred the indulgence of her own whims. Meditations on this kept him for awhile silent, and he was quite surprised to find that they had reached the Gate House. Eve was carefully lifted out, and, with the assurance that he would be with

her the same time the next day, he bid her good-bye and strode away in the direction of Bannerton.

CHAPTER XI.

It is the little rift within the lute,
That by-and-by will make the music mute,
And ever widening slowly silence all.

The little rift within the lover's lute,
Or little pitted speck in garner'd fruit,
That rotting inward slowly moulders all.

Vivien. TENNYSON.

WHEN Laurence left Eve at the Gate House and walked on into Bannerton, where he had some business, his mind was very full of the conversation he had just had. After all it really did not seem to him that Eve had done anything so very dreadful. Poor little thing! she evidently quite believed that no one cared

for her at home, and, although of course it was nonsense, still she certainly felt it deeply. How piteous she had looked as she said it, and how very pretty she was !

It was very strange that he had never admired her before ! He supposed it must be that he had never had eyes excepting for Iris, for she was undoubtedly lovely. Evidently Mrs. Pleydell was not fond of her : she was, as the girl herself said, hard upon her, and he was afraid Iris had been harsh too. It would have been better if she had not been in such a hurry to repeat what he had told her.

He wished now he had never told her what he had seen ; it had only made mischief, and got that soft, pretty little thing into trouble, for which he was heartily sorry. He would drive her every day till she went away, as some sort of amends. She seemed to enjoy it, and it must be pleasanter than going about with that grim old female Rogers as a duenna. Why could not Mrs. Pleydell trust the child ?

It was evident that she had given up all hope, and was striving to resign herself to her fate.

How she had sighed when she said that she would like so much to write once more! Poor child! why should she not? However, of course it was no business of his; he supposed mothers ought to know best what was good for their own daughters; all he could do was to amuse the poor child a little. Of course it was provoking losing the hunting and shooting, but, after all, it was not for long, and really, much to his own astonishment, he had not found the morning's occupation at all the bore which, it must be confessed, he had expected it to be.

Then his thoughts turned to what Eve had said of Iris. It really seemed very strange that she should lay such stress on her delight at meeting people that she was quite aware he did not like. It almost seemed like intentional opposition. Surely it could not be that she proposed to herself to take her own way after

they were married, irrespective of what his wishes and tastes might be.

Laurence almost gasped at the idea. His ideas of matrimony were, like those of the majority of men, decidedly autocratic. Without actually putting his thoughts into so many words, he felt that a woman's thankfulness at obtaining a husband, more especially such a one as himself, should make her ready and willing to yield to his lightest wish, never indeed to cherish a desire that was not in complete accordance with his.

He began to wonder uneasily if Iris were what is called strong-minded, able to think and decide for herself instead of, as was proper, depending on her husband to settle everything for her. He almost feared she might be. How often he had heard her attempt to argue, and, though of course she had at once yielded when he had shown her the absurdity of her views, still it was a bad sign that she should ever have even thought of giving her opinion. How different from Eve, who had no opinions, and

only chatted pleasantly about trifles, as women should.

But the head and front of Iris's offending lay in her having again referred to her wish to go to Rome. He had made it so abundantly clear that he did not wish to go, had even taken the trouble of explaining to her that there was nothing to see; and, apparently, as she was still harping on the subject, he might as well have saved himself the trouble. It was all the fault of that conceited puppy Thornham and his stupid sketches; but he thought Iris had had too much sense, and—well, yes, and dignity to attend to what a fellow like that said, instead of the man she was about to marry. If she had any consideration, too, it might surely occur to her that he would necessarily lose the cream of the hunting by their honeymoon, and consequently would not wish to make it longer than absolute necessity required.

Eve had thought of how much he would miss—Eve whom he had always fancied so

thoughtless of anything but her own amusement, and whom her mother and sister certainly always considered as selfish. It seemed to him that those who talked of selfishness had better look at home before they found fault with others. If it were Eve that he was going to marry, he had no doubt she would propose that the honeymoon should be spent at Rookwood, whereas he felt pretty certain that Iris would not relish such a suggestion.

Before he reached Bannerton he had almost worked himself up to the pitch of wondering whether, after all, he had chosen wisely. If Eve could but have known his state of mind, she would have congratulated herself hugely on her diplomacy. She was of a decidedly vindictive disposition, and never forgot an injury or a wound given to her vanity. She could not forgive Laurence for having witnessed her parting with Claud, nor for having betrayed her to Iris; it was worse than Lord Rootley: he was bad enough, but still he had

had the consideration to speak to her herself, and not to tell tales.

Still less could she forgive Iris. Mischief-making old thing, she called her. If she had only held her tongue, her mother would never have known anything about Mr. Esmond, and her escapade to London would have passed for only an attempt to re-establish herself with her aunt.

So in the long hours, when she lay in her bed or on the sofa, Eve arranged her plan of revenge. She would separate Laurence from Iris. Perhaps Iris did not care about him very much; she was so calm and cold that she probably did not, but she was very proud, and would be extremely mortified by his desertion. Besides, she *could* not lose without a pang such a place as Rookwood, or those splendid diamonds in which Mrs. Furnivall blazed on great occasions. She would be miserable, and would show it, and it would be sweet to Eve to know that it was her work.

Eve was very observant. She had lived so

entirely in the drawing-room with her aunt, that, when too old to be played with as a child, but too young to be talked to as a young lady, she had had ample opportunity of watching people, and gaining a good deal of insight into character. She knew a great deal more about Laurence's disposition and views than Iris did, and therefore exactly knew the little poisoned darts that would rankle in his mind while they sounded the most innocent observations in the world. She quite knew that he was more than half jealous of Iris's pleasure in the society of the clever people at Netherleigh, who, as she said to herself, "of course talked over his head, great stupid fellow!" Also, she knew how completely he had disposed of the proposition to visit Rome, and it was for that reason she had told him that Iris was "raving" about it.

Poor Iris! Her sober utterance on the subject, very far indeed from raving, had been: "I have been looking through Mr. Thornham's Roman portfolios again to-day, and perhaps

saw them better, as I had them all to myself, and there was no distraction of asking for explanations or listening to descriptions. The more I see, the more interesting and beautiful I am sure it must be, and I hope some day or other to explore it; but there is no hurry, and I must be careful not to interrupt any of Laurence's great enjoyments."

Eve had not quite made up her mind what she proposed to do with Laurence when she had detached him from Iris. When the deed was once done, she did not think there was much chance of their coming together again. Iris was, she thought, too proud ever to forgive such a slight: she would haughtily repel any advances even if he were to make them, and would remain a "cross old maid."

It was not like Eve to doubt her own powers of fascination, in which she generally had a very firm belief, yet she doubted whether she were able to make Laurence fall in love with her. It was not that she thought she could not conquer him if there were no obstacle, but

she feared that his knowledge of Mr. Esmond's existence, and recollection of the parting he had seen under the oak, besides the story of her journey to London, which, as mummy seemed to think it such a very shocking thing, Iris had doubtless made the most of to him, would quite alienate him.

But the drive to-day had given her hopes. She had, she thought, acquitted herself very well, been soft, and gentle, and pathetic, told him how little appreciated she was at home, and, while ostentatiously praising Iris's kindness, had said many things which went to prove her the reverse of kind. She had given her own version of her love-affair, and had acted, as she thought to perfection, the part of a submissive daughter bowing to her mother's arbitrary will, and only sighing for the permission to write one letter of dismissal and farewell to her lover. Also she thought she had hinted with consummate art that, though of course at present low and unhappy, she might not be always inconsolable.

And Laurence's frame of mind had been infinitely more favourable than she had expected. It was a wonderful thing that he should have given up a day's hunting for the sake of doing her a kindness, but he might have promised to do that hastily the day before, and then not have liked to retract. But he had volunteered to come again the next day, and that proved pretty conclusively that the drive had been pleasant:

Eve's creed was that a man, being a privileged being, able to do whatever seemed good in his eyes, never by any chance did anything he did not like, and that Laurence was as little likely as any of his sex to depart from that eminently comfortable rule. She was quite aware that at one time he had positively disliked her, she had been piqued that he had not instantly done her homage, and had snubbed him. That was before she had realized that he was in love with Iris, and had therefore neither eyes nor ears for anyone else, but it had taught her that to be won he must be soothed, and, above all,

that his dignity and self-love must not be ruffled.

Eve laughed to herself as she recalled how soft and gentle she had been that day, how she had abstained from any attempt at *persiflage*, and, above all, how she had shown her tender interest in all Laurence's sports and pastimes.

"It is rather hard work," she thought to herself, "but it gives me something to do, and, at any rate, it is more amusing than moving about with Rogers as duenna. I must be very careful to keep it up. I don't suppose he'll come again after to-morrow. Saturday is one of the best meets, and of course Sunday doesn't count, and on Wednesday we go to Cockleton-on-Sands. Great heavens! imagine Cockleton in December, with no one but mummy, who will read me 'improving works!' How I wish we could take Laurence! but that is past praying for. I really believe, with a very little coaxing, I could get him to post a letter to Claud. I should like to write of all things. How he

must wonder what has become of me! For of course as mummy directed to C. Esmond he never got the letters. However, I daren't risk it with Laurence. I want him to think it is all over and done with. If I could not only get him away from Iris, but make him in love with me, what fun it would be! How delicious it would be to refuse him, and say I despised a tell-tale! However, I have a good deal to do before it comes to that."

Eve strove to make herself as pleasant as possible the next day, and succeeded so well that Laurence announced he should come for her again on the Saturday.

"To-morrow! Laurence, you forget! It is the meet at Somerford."

"I don't forget, Eve, at all. I shall come for you all the same."

"But—it is very kind—but I couldn't *bear* you to lose your pleasure for me! Somerford is one of the best meets they always say."

"Nevertheless, Eve, I shall drive you. I

can't have the heart to leave you to the stuffiness of your Bath-chair, and the tender mercies of the bat."

Eve laughed.

"I like your remembering my name for her. But, Laurence, it really is too kind."

"Do you really think, Eve, that I *can't* give up a day's hunting?"

"No, not quite that. I don't know—only—Iris said—wasn't it hunting that put Rome out of the question?"

"Hang Rome!" exclaimed Laurence, angrily. "I beg your pardon, Eve, but I'm sick of the sound of it. I wouldn't go there if there was never to be hunting anywhere again."

It was very evident to him that Iris had been complaining of his decision, and grumbling about the hunting. It was exactly what Eve intended him to believe.

"Don't be vexed, Laurence," she said. "I am sure Iris won't mind. I'm sure no one could care to go abroad who had such a lovely place as Rookwood, and a house in

Park Lane, and everything they could wish."

"A house in Park Lane, Eve? What do you mean? I am never the least likely to have one there, or anywhere else in London."

"Really?" said Eve, with a look of surprise. "Oh, then, I suppose, I misunderstood."

"Misunderstood what?"

"What Iris said. It was just before they went to London, and Miss Netherleigh asked where your house was to be. I thought Iris said Park Lane, but of course, if you are not going to have one, I must have been mistaken."

She glanced at Laurence as she spoke, and was almost startled to see the dark sullenness of his countenance. It was evident that she had made a good shot.

Such was indeed the case. If there was one point upon which Laurence was more sensitive than another, it was the dread of

its being supposed that anyone managed him. Now what Eve had just let fall had given him exactly the impression she had intended, namely, that Iris was already arranging her future life without the slightest reference to his wishes.

A house in Park Lane indeed! when she knew perfectly well that he detested London, and never went there except on business. And, if he did not do so now when he was free to amuse himself as he pleased, was it likely that he should care to go when he was married, should be expected to go to stuffy dinners and crowded evening parties? Nothing would induce him to do such a thing! Iris must know that perfectly well, and she ought not even to wish it. But to talk as if it were a settled thing, to coolly discuss and settle where their house should be, was an offence of which he could not have believed her capable, and he drove on in gloomy silence, musing on what Eve had said.

At length she said, timidly,

“I am afraid I have vexed you, Laurence. I am so sorry if I have said anything I should not.”

She looked up at him in a pleading way; his brow cleared, and he smiled at her.

“You have done nothing wrong, Eve. I fancy the house in Park Lane would be much more tempting to you than Rookwood, eh, little one?”

“I don’t know,” said Eve, musingly, though she could hardly repress a shudder at the thought of living at Rookwood all the year round, as Laurence seemed to intend doing. If such were the case, could she do anything that would be more dreadful to Iris than inflict such a fate upon her? But perhaps it would not be so terrible to her, and besides, then there would be no punishment for Laurence.

“I am not sure. Of course I enjoyed myself very much, and I should like dearly to

go back to Aunt Louisa, for she loves me, and mummy doesn't. But—I don't know, if I were going to be married and happy, like Iris, the country might be as nice as London, particularly such a place as Rookwood—it would be very different from the Gate House."

"Well, rather," said Laurence, laughing.

"I don't suppose you can fancy how dull a little house by the side of the road, with just a garden, is. Mummy is always moaning over my not liking the country, and saying it 'shows a depraved taste,' but what *is* there to do? Iris gathers and arranges the flowers, and, if she didn't, that wouldn't take much of the day, and one does get tired of wandering up and down that strip of terrace. Now at Rookwood you can't see everything at once from your bed-room window. There would be some interest in going to see how things were getting on, and you could have any quantity of pets, horses and dogs, dear things."

"I am afraid Mousse wouldn't like your pets multiplied."

"Not at first; but he would soon get used to it. There would be some pleasure in walking, if one had dear creatures like your collie, Laddie, and your Irish water-spaniel, Nellie, to watch and pet. How Fuss hates them, by the by! And then one could ride!"

"Do you ride, Eve?"

"Yes; I always did when I was with Aunt Louisa. I asked mummy to let me have a horse here, but she said there was no one to ride with me. You know, Iris hasn't the nerve. She tried it, and had to give it up."

"Yes, I know; it is a great pity," for Laurence loved to see a woman on a horse, and provided she was a really good rider, and consequently not likely to interfere with his amusement, liked even to see her in the hunting-field.

He had tried to persuade Iris to try riding again under his auspices, and had been rather

vexed at the determination she had shown in declining, on the plea that her cowardice was quite invincible. She might, at any rate, have tried, if it were only to please him. She could have had as many horses as ever she liked, and here was Eve longing to ride, and was not allowed to do so. Certainly her mother did not seem to try to make home pleasant to her; it was hardly to be wondered at that she should have tried to make some little pleasure and excitement for herself, as she had done with Mr. Esmond.

“Well,” he said, “when we are settled I must see what can be done for you in the riding line.”

“Oh,” cried Eve, enthusiastically, “how good you are to me!” and she almost burst into tears.

It was a new experience to Laurence to find himself the object of so much gratitude, and he rather liked the sensation. It was true that he very thoroughly enjoyed these drives,

though he was sublimely unconscious that it was Eve's clever flattery that rendered them so pleasant; but he also liked to pride himself on his self-denial in giving up his favourite pursuits, and Eve's warmly expressed gratitude put plainly before him how extremely praiseworthy his conduct was. The girl was quite aware of this, and plied him dexterously with as much flattery as she thought prudent, while in the most innocent manner in the world she dropped just the observations about Iris that she judged were most likely to irritate him.

Each day Laurence came at the same time for Eve, and Mrs. Pleydell quite began to reproach herself for ever having thought him selfish. She wrote to Iris warm appreciation of his kindness, and the girl wrote cordially thanking him. But Eve's artfully-dropped words had borne fruit, and Laurence did not accept the letters loyally, but was always looking for ambiguous phrases and finding grounds of dis-

pleasure. He looked so gloomy the last day that he came to drive Eve, that she asked if anything were the matter.

"No, nothing particular, only Iris makes a great point of my going to Netherleigh again next week."

"Oh, for the tableaux! Of course you will go?"

"Well, I hardly know; it will be very inconvenient; I have a lot of things to do."

"I am afraid you have wasted so much time upon me. Oh! but, Laurence, you must go—it will be exquisite. It is such a great thing having an artist like that Mr. Thornham in the house, and Iris will look lovely as Guinevere. Of course you will be King Arthur?"

"I'm sure I shan't, even if I go; I hate all this play-acting sort of absurdity. I wonder Iris gives into it, it is very bad form, and so I told her."

"Oh! then, of course, she has given it up. What a disappointment for her!"

“No, she has done nothing of the sort. Writes that she wishes she had known I did not like it before, but that now she has promised, and Lady Netherleigh depends upon her, and that she is very sorry, but she must go on.”

“I should have thought *you* were of more consequence than Lady Netherleigh; but I ought not to say that. Of course Iris knows best. She is always right. Now listen to my news: the Beechmonts are going to give a ball on New Year’s Eve.”

“Are they?”

“Oh! I suppose you don’t care; but it will be a great treat to me. Think how long I have been without seeing anyone! Lady Beechmont wrote to-day, and mummy has promised to come back. Did you know Lord Rootley was going abroad?”

“Rootley? No. What for?”

“It seems he has had a bad cold on his chest and can’t shake it off, and the doctors say he must try a warm climate.”

"I should have thought he was too sensible to give in to coddling."

"You know the two eldest sons died of lung disease."

"Did they? That's no reason why he should go humbugging abroad."

"Mummy says there is great delicacy in the family, and that he is quite right to take care in time."

"Well, it is no business of mine, only *I* wouldn't go if all the doctors on earth told me. When does he start?"

"The end of the week."

"Well, good-bye, Eve. I can't come and see you off to-morrow; get well as fast as you can at Cockleton."

"How dull it will be! Oh, Laurence, how much I shall miss you!"

"It won't be for long."

"And you mustn't think I am ungrateful because I haven't said much, but indeed I have felt it—your giving up so much time to me, I

mean," and, looking up at him with her soft brown eyes full of tears, she held out her hand.

"Don't talk like that, Eve," he said, warmly, as he pressed it; "it has been a great pleasure, and—I'm very sorry you're going away."

He might have been a little surprised, firmly believing, as he did, what Eve had told him of her submission to her mother's decree respecting Mr. Esmond, if he could have seen the letter which she wrote in her own room that night.

"DEAREST CLAUD,

"You must *wonder* that I never answered *two* letters which I hear you wrote to me, but which my mother opened and returned to you. As, however, she directed to the name of *Esmond*, of course you never got them. *Why* didn't you meet me that day at Euston? As you didn't, I waited and missed

the train I was going back by, and so mummy and Iris got back first, and I was missing, and *there was a row*, and Iris, like a *nasty, spiteful* old thing as she is, told about my meeting you when Laurence saw us. Ever since I've been laid up *awfully* ill with scarlet fever, and now I'm better, mummy won't let me out of her sight, for fear I should meet you or *post a letter*. She's *awfully* cross to me, and it's *no use* your writing to me, for she wouldn't let me have the letter. She says, *even if you came to her openly* now and asked for me, she would refuse, because 'you inveigled me into a secret engagement'!

"But I've got an idea. You say you've a great deal to tell me (so you have, *quite a lot* to *explain*), and I've a *great deal* to say to you. Can't you get invited to Beechmont? You said you knew them well, and if you come down as Mr. Urban, no one will ever be the wiser that you were here as Mr. Esmond. The *only* person who would know is Lord Rootley,

and he is going abroad *at once* for three months because of his lungs. There is to be a big party at Beechmont the end of the month, and a *ball on the 31st*, to see the new year in. Couldn't you manage to get asked then? It would be no use before, because we go away to-morrow for change of air for me (to Cockle-ton-on-Sands—odious place!), and only come back in time for the ball. I'm sure you could manage it if you *really* tried; if you don't, I shall take it for granted you *don't care about me any more*.

“I shall take this letter with me to-morrow, and try to post it at the station, but mummy and her odious old maid Rogers watch me as a cat does a mouse.

“Ever your own,

“EVE.

“P.S.—They have cut off all my hair, but I don't think it looks at all bad, now that it is beginning to curl all over like a poodle.”

No one, to look at Eve's innocent, childish face as she drove up to the Bannerton station the next morning, would have believed it possible that she had in her mind a deep plot, involving her sister's happiness, and had at that moment in her pocket a letter to a forbidden lover, on which all the energies of her mind were concentrated in order to post it unobserved.

Mrs. Pleydell went to take the tickets. Eve shivered.

"Mummy, it is draughty here; mayn't I go to the book-stall and get a book?"

"Yes—take Rogers with you," and the solemn maid moved to the girl's side.

"Look there, Rogers," said Eve suddenly: "surely that is one of our boxes that man is wheeling away to the other end of the platform, and all the rest are gone the other way."

Rogers turned her head, and in that moment Eve deftly slipped her letter into the box they

were passing. In another moment she was at the book-stall, absorbed in the choice of a novel.

CHAPTER XII.

When to mischief mortals bend their will,
How soon they find fit instrument of ill.

Rape of the Lock. POPE.

COCKLETON-ON-SANDS was quite as dull as Eve had anticipated. Mrs. Pleydell in no way relaxed her vigilance; it was not only that she was anxious to prevent Eve from committing any further imprudence, but she wished the girl to feel herself in disgrace and under surveillance.

When she did not go out with her herself, she always sent Rogers, who hated the duty, and was proportionately cross; and Eve revenged herself by being as sulky and disagree-

able as was possible. When required to read aloud books which did not interest her, she pretended violent hoarseness, and when her mother read to her she calmly went to sleep.

Perhaps Mrs. Pleydell, in her not unnatural vexation and annoyance, drew the reins a little too tight, but she acted after anxious deliberation as she believed for the best, and was sorely troubled and disappointed by the way in which Eve fought against her authority. It was, she thought with a sigh, but a dreary prospect for the future.

How sadly different her life would be with this obstinate, sullen child, who seemed possessed of an absolutely endless ingenuity in devising methods of quiet insubordination and annoyance, from what it had been with Iris, who had ever accepted her mother's word as law, and with whom she had never had the shadow of a disagreement.

Still it had to be undergone ; and Mrs. Pleydell tried to look forward as hopefully as was

possible, and to devise any means by which Eve might be rendered more submissive and companionable. She despaired of an appeal to her affections. She had watched the girl narrowly and anxiously ever since her return home, and was tolerably aware of the truth that she cared for no one in the world so much as herself. This was bad ground on which to work, and the nature of her meditations did not tend to render Cockleton a more attractive place than it really was.

She was very greatly astonished one day by the appearance of Laurence, who paid them a flying visit on his way back from Netherleigh. He had been persuaded to go for the tableaux, but had not made himself specially pleasant there; indeed he had been so silent, and on occasion so snappish, that Lady Netherleigh had confided to her husband that Iris was a great deal too good for him, and that, late as it was, she should be very glad if the girl found it out and gave him his *congé*.

Iris was both pained and puzzled by Laurence's behaviour. She devoted herself to him as entirely as the claims on her time for rehearsing the various tableaux would allow, but he was decidedly sulky, and disposed to make a very great grievance of her having consented to take part in them. Various parts had been purposely left for him, chiefly those which would bring him most closely into contact with Iris, but he absolutely refused to appear, declaring that nothing should induce him to make a fool of himself, while he at the same time made innumerable objections to her appearing with others.

It was in vain that she assured him that, had she had any idea that he would disapprove, nothing would ever have induced her to take part in the tableaux; that he might be quite sure that she would never again have anything to do with such an entertainment, but that it was absolutely impossible for her to withdraw now; there was no one to take her place, the

whole thing would collapse, and both Sir Charles and Lady Netherleigh, who had been most kind to her, would be greatly hurt and annoyed.

Laurence would not take her explanations in good part, was cross to her whenever she spoke even in the most trivial manner to any of the other men in the house, and was altogether so disagreeable and unreasonable that Iris felt sure he must be ill, and racked her brains to think what could be the matter with him.

Girls brought up without brothers, cousins, or some other intimate male relatives, are very much at a disadvantage in understanding the tempers and whims of their lovers, compared with those to whom these masculine peculiarities are familiar. They do not realize that a man does not consider it necessary to conceal the fact that something has put him out, or that, with or without reason, he is extremely cross, and are quite appalled at exhibitions of temper of which he thinks nothing, and which their

more experienced sisters would accept as simple matters of course.

Mrs. Pleydell had gathered from Iris's letters that something had not gone quite smooth, though the girl had been most loyal, and had not said a word of blame of her lover. Indeed Iris did not blame him; she loved him too dearly, and was only grieved that she had inadvertently done anything of which he disapproved.

He appeared in excellent spirits when he reached Cockleton, and the effect of his presence on Eve was quite surprising. She became in an instant gentle, obedient, amiable; did not grumble at dulness, but appeared pleased with everything, and was altogether a totally different creature.

Laurence, who while at Netherleigh had heard a good deal from Iris of all that her mother was suffering from the girl's waywardness and obstinacy, was confirmed in his belief that the poor child was harshly treated and misunderstood, and had good reason to say, as

she had done so piteously, that no one at home cared for her.

How different was the tone of reprobation which Iris used respecting Eve from the loving, admiring way in which Eve spoke of her! Eve, he was sure, would never act in direct opposition to the wishes of the man she professed to love, as Iris had just done; indeed, had not her first exclamation, when she heard that he disapproved of the tableaux, been, "Oh, then of course she will give them up!" She was a sweet, gentle, loving little thing, and, if he had only met her earlier, perhaps——

Eve was immensely elated by this visit of Laurence's to Cockleton; it showed that she had made a very considerable impression upon him, and during the three days that he spent with them she spared no pains to deepen it in every way in her power, and also to say sweet-sounding things about Iris, which, however, were barbed darts that rankled and festered in his mind.

Laurence had come to Cockleton half conscious that he had been rather unreasonable, and had not behaved particularly well at Netherleigh; he left it fully convinced that Iris had treated him extremely ill, and that many men had broken off their engagements for less. He had not yet arrived at thinking of doing so; the wedding was fixed for the 20th of January, and as yet he had every intention of carrying out his engagement. But more than once after a walk with Eve, during which she had plied him with the subtle flattery which she so well knew how to administer, he had sighed and thought regretfully to himself that he had made a mistake.

Two days after Christmas Mrs. Pleydell and Eve left Cockleton-on-Sands; the girl's health was quite re-established, and but for the closely-cropped hair, which, now that it curled all over her head, was far from being unbecoming to her, there was no trace of her having been an invalid.

The change which Laurence's unexpected

appearance had wrought in her temper and behaviour partially continued. She was not so uniformly amiable, but still she was far more agreeable than she had been at first, and Mrs. Pleydell felt duly thankful for even a slight improvement.

The first thing they did in London, where they were only to remain two nights, was to pay a visit to Mrs. William Pleydell. She welcomed them warmly, Eve almost rapturously, and there was a great deal to be told about the girl's illness. After they had been there some little time the door opened, and "Mr. Francia" was announced.

"A very old friend of mine—of course I am not receiving generally as yet," said Mrs. William, hurriedly, and her sister-in-law was surprised to observe that she coloured violently, and certainly seemed ill at ease.

She had little difficulty in recognising in Mr. Francia the gentleman whom she had met in the hall when leaving Park Street in October. He was a portly man, above the middle height,

with a very dark, olive-coloured skin, a short, thick black beard and black flowing hair, which colouring rendered very remarkable his light blue eyes.

“I never saw such a curious combination,” was Mrs. Pleydell’s reflection; “somehow it gives a disagreeable impression.”

But the stranger’s manner was extremely pleasant: he was evidently on very intimate terms with the hostess, and Mrs. Pleydell concluded that he was a foreigner who had been in some business connection with her late brother-in-law, whose house, as she knew, had a good deal to do with South America. Tom’s name was mentioned, and Mr. Francia, regretting that he had never yet met him, Mrs. William suddenly suggested that her sister-in-law and Eve should dine with her the next night, and that Mr. Francia and Tom should meet them.

It was agreed that such should be the case, and Mrs. Pleydell found herself almost wishing that Eve would make herself as disagreeable as

she had done at Cockleton, and so put an end to poor Tom's infatuation. However, she knew that was not likely. Eve kept her ill temper strictly for private use.

The dinner went off very pleasantly: Mr. Francia made himself most agreeable, and the conversation was general, though Tom tried hard more than once to monopolize Eve. Later in the evening he talked for a short time to his aunt, and she told him all that had passed between her and Eve respecting Mr. Esmond, and what she had done.

"And he has not answered your letter?"

"No, nor has he written to Eve. I am certain of this, because I have taken complete control of the letter-bag."

"Do you think she frets about him?"

"Not a bit. She pouted and was very sulky, but any trifle that crosses her will has that effect. I wish, Tom, I could persuade you that it is not in Eve to care for anyone but herself."

He shook his head.

"I *can't* believe it, Aunt Grace. I know her so long and well. However, I am glad both for your sake and hers that she hasn't taken this to heart."

"How is it that you didn't know this Mr. Francia? I suppose, by Louisa's knowing him so well, he must have been a friend of your father's?"

"No, I think not; at least, I never saw him before. He has just established himself in a large business in London, and I know him by reputation; it is said to be a rich house, very much in our old line."

"He seems such a friend of Louisa's, might he not be of use to you?"

"How strange you should say that! After you went upstairs, he actually sounded me a little as to whether I should feel disposed to leave my present situation and take a very important position in his firm. I was too surprised at first to answer, and he went on to

touch on my poor father's misfortunes, and to say how sorry all business men had been for me. He really spoke very kindly, and said that the experience I had had under my father would be invaluable to him, while it was practically useless in my present situation."

"Oh! Tom, it sounds as if it were the very thing for you. What did you say?"

"That it was very kind of him, but that I could not decide at once. I must think it over. Aunt Grace, I suppose it is very foolish, but there is something I do not like about his face."

"You mean the curious combination of light blue eyes, and that very dark skin and hair. It is most peculiar. Still I don't think it would be right to let that prejudice you."

"No, I suppose not. Well, I must think it over."

"You will come to us for the wedding, Tom?"

As she said this, Mrs. Pleydell felt that she was not wise. She wished to cure him of his

love for Eve, and yet she had invited him to come and see her.

“If I can, Aunt Grace; you know, I am hardly my own master now. Eve looks none the worse for her illness.”

“No; she is quite well and strong.”

On their return home, Eve found a letter awaiting her from Lady Hildegarde.

“I want to be the first to tell you the news,” she wrote: “only fancy! old Image is going to be married. It isn’t anything very exciting, though, only Rootley’s *protégée*, Mr. Morton, the Rector of Elmhurst. However, it’ll just suit Image to be a clergyman’s wife and go to church twice a day, and lecture the school-children, and coddle all the old women. She never had an idea of enjoying herself. We are to have a jolly party for the ball; they all come to-morrow. You know a good few of them”—here followed a long list of names, among which Eve’s eager eyes at once saw that of Urban. “This frost and snow is delicious; we

shall have sleighing and skating; the large pool in the wood is to be flooded every night. Come up to-morrow and have a good talk. I may not come to you. Mamma says *you* are safe, but the house may not be, and it would be an awful bore to catch the fever. So mind you come, *before* lunch, if you can.

“Yours,—H.”

Eve announced Lady Imogene's marriage and begged permission to go up to Beechmont the next morning. Mrs. Pleydell hesitated, but Eve seemed so exhilarated by the idea of the party, the ball, and the skating, and chattered so merrily of her pleasure at meeting various of her old London partners, that her mother thought that, while her head was so full of present pleasure, she was hardly likely to give much thought to Mr. Esmond and past experiences. She therefore gave her consent and herself drove off to see Aunt Rachel.

In the afternoon Laurence made his appear-

ance, and was greatly disappointed at only finding Mrs. Pleydell at home. Eve had not returned, and had evidently been kept to luncheon. He seemed very *distract*, often sat for some time without speaking, and started when he was addressed, till Mrs. Pleydell began to think there was something very strange the matter with him.

At length he took his departure, and she would have been still more surprised had she known that instead of turning homewards he walked up the Beechmont avenue. He had no intention of calling at the house: he only hoped to meet Eve. He had almost reached the house, however, before he did so,—so much the better, he should have the longer walk with her.

“Laurence!” she exclaimed, in surprise: “are you going to call? They are at home.”

“No, Eve,” as he turned and walked beside her: “I came on the chance of walking home with you.”

"I thought you would have gone to the station perhaps to meet Iris."

"Iris! I had quite forgotten. I thought it was to-morrow."

This was strange, for Mrs. Pleydell had only just asked him if he expected Iris to come by the early train and whether he would not stay to tea to welcome her on her arrival.

"No, to-day, and we are all to dine at Beechmont to-morrow. The skating will be delightful."

"Eve, I wish you were not so fond of Lady Hildegarde."

She stopped and looked up at him in the most innocent manner possible.

"Do you, Laurence? Why?"

"She is not a good friend for you, she is both fast and slang and—very objectionable."

Laurence still felt the sting of Lady Hildegarde's snubbing.

"Do you really think so?" said Eve,

slowly; "I know mummy says so, but then she cannot bear me to enjoy myself."

"I really mean it, Eve. I wish you would keep as much aloof as possible."

"You don't mean to give up Beechmont? It is the only place where there is any fun."

"But you can go there without being hand and glove with Lady Hildegarde."

Eve would dearly have liked to tell him to mind his own business, that it was Iris whose friends concerned him, and not hers. But to have done so would have put an abrupt end to all her designs, so she constrained herself to say softly,

"Well, Laurence, I'm sure you are right, I'll try and keep aloof, but think how dull it is at home with mummy always preaching at me about being ignorant, and making me read dull books for hours and hours every day. Don't say I oughtn't to go and skate, or enjoy the ball, or all that. I won't be with Hildegarde more than I can help."

This Eve knew was a safe promise when the house was full of company, for Lady Hildegarde seldom wasted her time on a girl when she had companions of the opposite sex. He stopped and took both her hands.

“Eve, you’re the sweetest, gentlest little thing in all the world. You would never stand on your rights and insist on exercising your own judgment. You are always ready to give in. Of course I don’t want to stop your enjoying yourself, only—I should hate to see you fast and—and worldly like Lady Hildegarde.”

“I am sure, Laurence, anything you said was kindly meant to me.”

How bewitching she looked as she stood looking up at him in the fast gathering twilight, with the soft rings of golden hair just escaping from the close sealskin cap! An impulse too strong to be resisted came over Laurence, or, perhaps being naturally self-indulgent, he did not resist very strenuously.

He caught Eve in his arms and pressed kiss after kiss upon her lips. Then without looking at her he walked rapidly away through one of the narrow woodland glades.

It was not a moment too soon. He had hardly disappeared when the carriages came in sight conveying the Beechmont guests from the station.

END OF THE SECOND VOLUME.



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